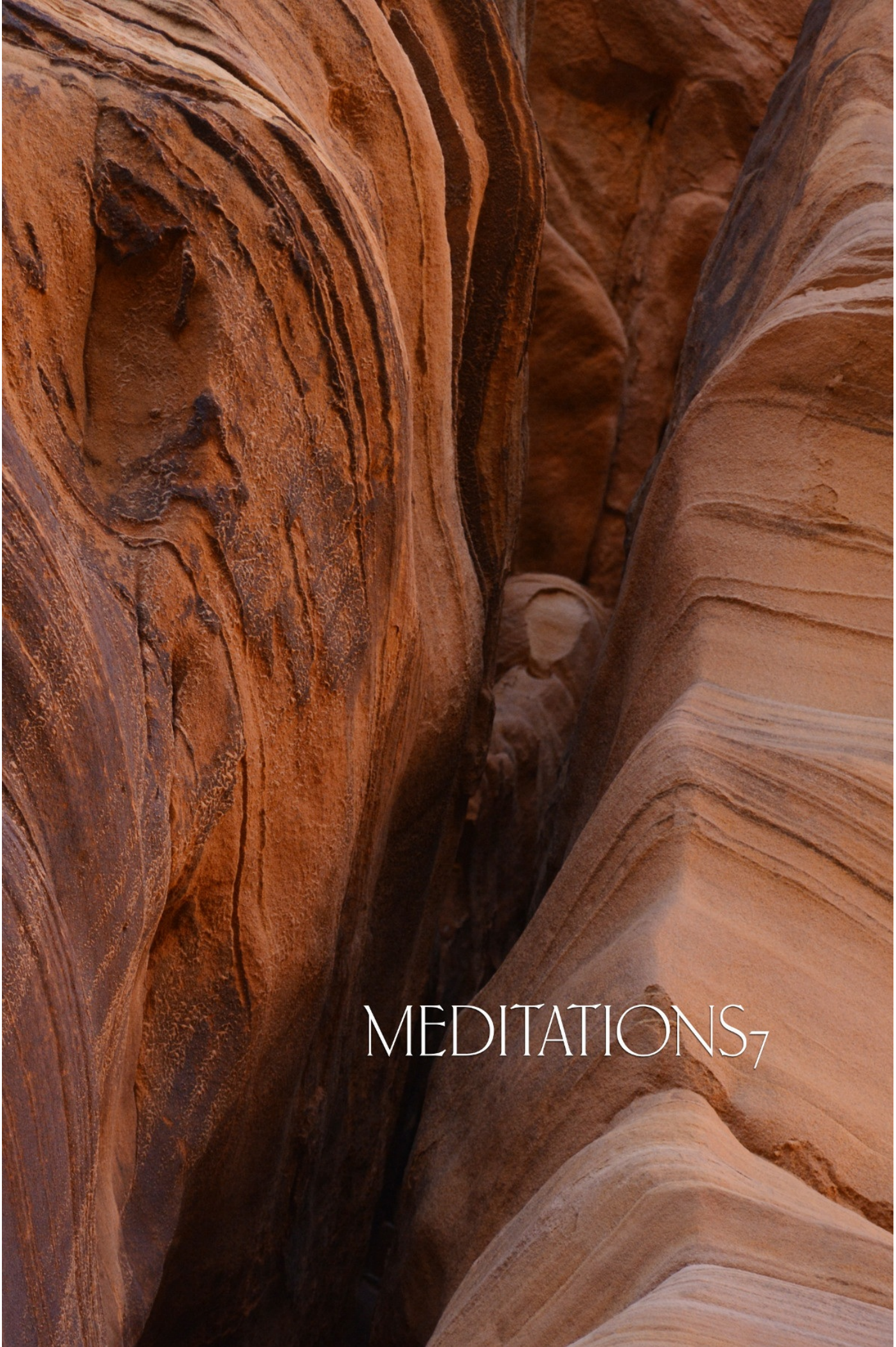
MEDITATIONS7

Meditations 7

Dhamma Talks

by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

questions about this book may be addressed to

Metta Forest Monastery
Valley Center, CA 92082-1409
U.S.A.

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Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon and a chanting session followed by a group meditation period later in the evening. The Dhamma talks included in this volume were given during the evening meditation sessions, and in many cases covered issues raised at the interviews—either in the questions asked or lurking behind the questions. Often these issues touched on a variety of topics on a variety of different levels in the practice. This explains the range of topics covered in individual talks.

I have edited the talks with an eye to making them readable while at the same time trying to preserve some of the flavor of the spoken word. In a few instances I have added passages or rearranged the talks to make the treatment of specific topics more coherent and complete, but for the most part I have kept the editing to a minimum. Don't expect polished essays.

The people listening to these talks were familiar with the meditation instructions included in "Method 2" in Keeping the Breath in Mind by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo; and my own book, With Each & Every Breath. If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. Additional Dhamma talks are available at www.accesstoinsight.org and www.dhammatalks.org.

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As with the previous volumes in this series, I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: Virginia Lawrence, Marilyn Lemon, Carol McDonald, Judi Faabeng, Antony Woods, Barbara Pereira, Paul Glezen, Emily Neykov, Thomas Cleary, Linda Harter, Addie Onsanit, Nathaniel Osgood, and Isabella Trauttmansdorff; Vens. Balaggo Bhikkhu, Gunaddho Bhikkhu, Khematto Bhikkhu, and Vijjakaro Bhikkhu. May they all be happy.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

METTA FOREST MONASTERY
JULY, 2016

What's Getting in the Way

August 19, 2013

One of the main purposes of listening to the Dhamma is to get a sense of possibilities. We read the life of the Buddha to get a sense of what a human being can do, but all too often his story seems to be off there in never-never land, something someone far away in a far distant time was able to do. But to what extent is it relevant to us? To what extent can we *make* it relevant to what we're doing?

It's good to bring that measuring stick up close. What would it be like to have a mind that didn't have any doubts about the deathless? What would it be like to have a mind where there would be no possibility that it would ever be a slave again to sensual desire? What would it be like to be totally free of defilement and suffering? Do those questions interest you?

They should, because they're directly connected with happiness. We have tendencies in our minds that make us miserable, yet we're so used to them that we don't think that things could be another way. This means that we end up looking for our happiness within the confines of a very narrow sense of our range, of what's possible for us. That's how we keep ourselves hemmed in.

As Ajaan Chah says, it's like being a frog down a little hole. And in northeastern Thailand, what do they do with frogs in holes? They take a long wire and they put a hook at the end and they stick it down in the hole and they pull out the frog. And as Ajaan Chah adds, if the hook doesn't get you by the jaw, it's by the ribs, into your guts. The hooks go that deep. If you're hemmed in by your ideas of what you can do, that's your future. Aging, illness, and death are going to come with their hook. They might catch you by the ribs. They might catch you by the jaws. Who knows where they're going to catch you? It's because you hemmed yourself in that you're an easy target.

This is why it's good to open your mind to possibilities that you might not have thought of before and to use the Buddha's measuring stick. Even when he talks about something as simple as concentration: What would it be like to have the mind settle down so that it gains a sense of rapture, a sense of ease? Don't keep that possibility far away. Ask yourself, where is the potential for rapture right now? Where is the potential for ease right now? It's there. It may not be blatant, but it's there.

One way of inducing rapture is to ask yourself, "Which parts of the body right now feel relaxed or even just okay?" When you breathe in, can they maintain that quality of feeling okay, or is there a little squeeze on them? Try noticing your hands. You breathe in, breathe out, and does the flow of energy at any point in the breath cycle put a squeeze on the hands—on any of the muscles in any part of the hand? Can you breathe in a way that *doesn't* induce that squeeze? How long can you keep that up? And when you *can* keep it up, can you let it spread up the arms?

If you don't like the hands, you can try the feet—or any part of the body. Look for the potentials that are here right now. The Buddha says they're here. Everything we need to know for awakening is right here, and yet we don't see it. All we see are the things that we've seen before, because we look at them in the same way we've looked at them before. We don't learn to look at things in different ways.

This is why Dogen, the Zen master, said that a large part of meditation is learning how to de-think your thinking. Use different eyes to look at the potentials right here. Ask different questions. Where is the potential for rapture? Where is the potential for ease? Where in the mind is the potential for stillness? What would happen if you developed those potentials and kept at it? When, say, sensual desire does come up in the mind, what would it be like not to give in? And what would the mind need to do to be in a position where it would feel secure that it would never give in? What would that mind be like? These are good questions to ask. They expand our range.

The Buddha says that there are several things that, when you think about them or try to get your head around them, you go crazy. Two of them are, "What's the range of a person who's attained jhana?" and "What's the range of a Buddha?" We're not here to get our heads around these things. We're here to pose the question of what it would be like to explore some of that range. That's a useful way of thinking. In other words, we can't define that the Buddha had only these many powers or those many powers, because after all, he was a pretty quiet person in one way, in that there were a lot of things he knew that he wouldn't talk about. Remember his image of the handful of leaves: What he learned in the course of his awakening was like all the leaves in the forest. What he taught was just the handful of leaves. So there's a huge part of awakening that we'll never know about—unless we put in the necessary effort to gain awakening ourselves. That was what the handful of leaves is for: to open your mind to the possibility of awakening to total freedom, and to show you how it's done.

It's the same with the powers that come from mastering the jhanas. If you gain them, and you're a monk, you're not supposed to talk about them to lay people. You may mention them to other monks, but even then, you have to be

very careful. Ajaan Lee was extremely circumspect in this way about what he knew, what his attainments were. He never even told Ajaan Fuang when and where he had gained his noble attainments. And Ajaan Fuang told me that he himself had been very severely chastised by Ajaan Mun over this same sort of issue. He'd be meditating out in the forest and he'd see a mountain, so he wanted to check it out: Who are the devas over there in the mountain? Sometimes he'd mention what he saw to his friends, and even though they were fellow monks, Ajaan Mun came down on him hard. He said, "What you learn in your meditation is your business and nobody else's." So there's a lot we can't know about other people's abilities and attainments. The only way to find out about what's possible in jhana or in awakening is to master those skills yourself.

We look at the teachings in the Canon and they seem huge: 45 volumes. Many people suspect that not all of them come from the Buddha, but then, there's an awful lot that seems genuine. Yet even that is just the handful of leaves.

So to get to know that handful of leaves, and see what possibilities get opened up by following them: What would that be like? What would it be like to really see, as the Buddha says, that the best way to think about suffering is to see it as the act of clinging to the five aggregates. By defining suffering in this way, he's giving you a handle on how to understand it, how to take it apart. Yet even just these few leaves we haven't really mastered.

There's a huge range of possibilities. As the Buddha said, what he learned and attained didn't come from anything else aside from his ardency, his resolution, his heedfulness—qualities that we can all develop if we want them.

So it's good to let the range of the Buddha's knowledge and the idea of a totally pure mind, a totally free mind, capture your imagination—not so that you just think about them, but so that you ask yourself, "Right now, what am I doing that's getting in the way of knowing those things? What attitudes do I have that are obstructive? Where am I fixated right now? What do I like to fantasize about? How's that getting in the way? What would happen if I could drop those things, even for a little while?" We've had our imagination distracted by so many useless things in the world, things that have a certain amount of use but tend to put blinders on us and close our imaginations to the larger things of which the mind is capable, the heart is capable—*your* heart is capable. An important part of the practice is learning how not to let those obstructions get in the way.

How & Why We Meditate

March 10, 2012

We start with thoughts of goodwill to remind ourselves of why we want to meditate. We want to find a happiness that's reliable, that doesn't harm us or anybody else. That's why we spread goodwill both to ourselves and to all beings, to remind ourselves that we're looking for a special kind of happiness.

Then, when we're clear about why we're doing it, we settle down to business. Here, the business is watching your breath. Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. You feel the passage of air through the nose but you also feel the rise and fall of the chest, sometimes the rise and fall of the abdomen or the shoulders. Notice where the feeling of breathing is most pronounced. Allow your attention to settle there and keep it there all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and even in the moments between the breaths.

As you breathe in, notice if there's any unnecessary tension in that part of the body. It may be that the breath is too long, so that as you get toward the end of the breath it's beginning to feel uncomfortable. Well, allow the breath to grow shorter. Or if it's too short and you feel like you're not really getting the full energy of the breath, allow it to stretch out a bit. In other words, experiment with the breathing to see what feels best.

If you find something that feels good, stick with it. It may feel good for a long time, or it may feel good for just a little while and then not so good anymore. In that case, try changing it again. Try to keep on top of what the body needs.

The purpose here is twofold: one, to get the mind to settle down in the present moment, and two, to be observant. The breath is one of the few bodily functions that you can actually change consciously, so try to take advantage of that fact, both for the settling down and for the being observant. If the breath feels good and you find it interesting to notice how the way you breathe has an impact on how the body feels, that helps you to stay in the present moment. You start learning about what the breath is doing—and as you learn about the breath, you're going to be able to learn about the mind as well.

Because ultimately the breath is not the problem. The real problem lies in the mind. We all want happiness and yet we choose to do things that can lead to

pain, for ourselves or for other people. So there's a disconnect. The question is, where exactly is the disconnect, and why? Sometimes it's because we don't have a very clear knowledge of what our intentions are. Or it may be because we don't really see the connection between our actions and their results.

So, starting with the breath, notice what your intention is. You're here for the sake of happiness. You're here to learn how to train the mind so that it doesn't create a lot of problems. And of course, not every part of your mind is going to be cooperative. Some parts are going to wander away with other agendas. So for the time being you just let them go. In other words, you don't have to get entangled with them. Just notice that there are other thoughts in the mind, not connected with the breath, but you don't have to follow them. That right there is an important insight. You don't have to run after everything that comes up in the mind.

Then stick with the breath as long as you can and see what impact it has on the mind and on the body. This is the part of the practice that requires some conviction. It's like making scrambled eggs. The right way to make scrambled eggs is to keep the heat really low. You stand there, stirring the eggs in the pan, and nothing seems to be happening. You feel a very strong temptation to turn up the heat to speed things up, but you have to resist that temptation. Just keep on stirring and stirring and stirring, and after a while the eggs really do begin to coagulate on the bottom of the pan. It's in the period when you don't see any immediate results coming that you need to have the conviction that the cookbook was right.

It's the same with the meditation. There are times when you sit in meditation and nothing much seems to be happening. And so you need the conviction to stick with it to give it time to do its work.

This is why we have the chants on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha prior to the meditation: to remind ourselves that this path we're following here is not a brand new path. It's not something we just recently cooked up. In fact, the Buddha himself said he didn't invent the path. He discovered an old path. There had been Buddhas before him, awakened people before him, and this is the same path they all discovered.

We have all of the Buddha's awakened disciples' guarantee that, Yes, this path does work. So you just stick with it. Part of the mind will complain because, of course, the mind still has its greed, aversion, and delusion. It's not the case that you sit down, close your eyes, and they all go away. They hide out for a while, but they're going to come up again. And they're going to complain: They'd rather do this, think that, go here, go there. Just remind yourself that you've been following greed, aversion, and delusion for who knows how long. They do provide some pleasure, but there's usually a lot of pain that goes along with that

pleasure, and they leave you holding the bag. And you've been falling for their tricks again and again and again. How about trying something new? New for *you* at least. Something different.

So you just stick with the breath, stick with it, stick with it. As the Buddha said, patient endurance is what burns away a lot of the issues in the mind. It doesn't solve all the problems. The ultimate problems are going to require very refined discernment. You develop that discernment from your right effort as you practice. So, to develop right effort as a beginning step, you use whatever cruder skills you have at your disposal: conviction, patience, your stick-to-it-iveness.

Now, that can get very old very quickly if you don't have something of interest. That's why we emphasize working with the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, the next step is to think of that sense of comfortable breath spreading through different parts of the body. When we talk of "breath" here, it's not air coming in and out. It's the movement of energy in the body, which is what gets the air to come in and out to begin with. Without that energy, nothing would come in and out at all.

So notice, when you breathe in: Where do you feel the energy flow in the body? If you're really sensitive, you find that it goes throughout every nerve in your body, from the top of the head, down to the feet, down the shoulders, down the arms, all through the torso, deep into the head, all around. There's even an energy that surrounds the body.

So try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to the energy that's happening right here. If you can't feel it everywhere, focus on the areas where you can feel it, where it's most blatant. Eventually, as your sensitivity develops, you'll notice it in areas where you never sensed it before. You'll start to realize that many of the sensations you are familiar with are actually breath sensations.

As with any delicate task, this takes time. But if you have something with which to entertain yourself, you find it easier to stick with the task. Here the entertainment is actually part of the work. We've talked about working with the breath. We can also talk about playing with it. It can actually be fun. Start noticing that there are spots, say in your spine, where there's a lot of tension, but if you consciously relax the tension, a sense of flow will go through. It feels a lot more refreshing. You may find that releasing one spot of tension in the body has a chain reaction effect, so that other areas of tension in the body begin to relax as well. This is something that's fun to explore.

You may notice that the way you hold your body will change. When the flow of the breath energy in the body is improved, this is going to be good for your posture, good for your health. This is medicine that doesn't cost you anything at all.

And as for the work, try to spread your awareness to fill the whole body, so that eventually you'll be aware of the whole body all the time through the in-breath, all the time through the out. That broadens the range of your awareness, and you begin to see things happening in the mind that you didn't see before. They were hidden in a blind spot because the range of your awareness was very narrow. But as you allow the awareness to broaden out, you begin to see little bits and snatches of thoughts here and there. You can catch sight of the mind's decisions. Usually, in an ordinary mind, there are several conversations going on at once. You may be paying attention to one or two, but there are others going on as well. Every now and then you slip in, add a little something, and then slip right out. Then you can deny what you just did, telling yourself that you didn't do any of that slipping around at all.

This is one of the reasons why we don't see the connection between our actions and the suffering we cause. There's a fair amount of denial going on in the mind. But when your range of awareness is all-around like this, it's harder to maintain that denial. And it's better for you that you don't. You can begin to see what's going on, and you're in a position to do something about it.

Some unskillful thoughts in the mind can hang on simply because you're not paying attention to them. When you see them clearly, it's very easy to let them go. There are others, though, that are going to require more work: what the Buddha calls "exerting a fabrication," or "fabricating an exertion." He uses both phrases. What they both mean is that you have to do some conscious work in order to understand why you're stuck on this particular kind of action or kind of thinking. Then you make the effort to provide the mind with an alternative, a more skillful alternative to the way you've been thinking. And it turns out that the way you breathe is very intimately connected with all of this. It's called bodily fabrication. As I said, it's one of the few functions in the body that you can intentionally change. So you work with that and put it to use.

Suppose that anger comes up in the mind. One of the first things you can do about it is to notice where in the body is the tension that goes along with the anger. Then try to breathe through it. Think of the breath energy as just dissolving that tension away, allowing it to dissipate out into the air, so you don't have to keep carrying it around—or you don't feel burdened with the need to get it out in your words or your deeds.

As you're working with the breath, you also become sensitive to two other kinds of fabrication the Buddha talked about. One is called verbal fabrication, which is the way the mind talks to itself. It directs its thoughts to a particular topic and then it starts evaluating the topic and deciding what it likes and what it doesn't like, what it wants to do and doesn't want to do with regard to that topic.

When you're working with the breath, you're engaging in just that kind of

verbal fabrication. You become more conscious of it. You realize that you can change the way you talk to yourself about things—especially when you start getting new perspectives about what's going on in the present moment, as to what's going on in the mind and what's going on in the body.

Then there's what the Buddha calls mental fabrication, which are the perceptions, the labels we apply to things, along with feelings: feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.

And again, as you're working with the breath, you get hands-on experience in how you can shape these things and use them to shape the state of your mind. When you stick with the breath, you're also holding a particular perception of the breath in mind. If you think of the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the nose, that influences how you're going to breathe and the way you experience the breath. But if you think about the energy in the body as being breath, then it can go anywhere in the nervous system. It can go through anything at all. That gives you another perception. It's going to change the way you actually experience the breath. You can start to think of all those little tiny nerve endings going all the way out to the pores of your skin. They've got breath energy, too. If you hold that perception in mind, how does that change the way you breathe? How does it change the way you feel in the present moment? Does it feel more pleasant? If not, what other perception of breathing can you think of that would?

So as you focus on working and playing with the breath, you're getting some conscious experience in learning how to manipulate what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication, to create a sense of ease within the body and mind.

Then you can use those same fabrications to deal with whatever else comes up in the mind. For the time being, you don't want to get too involved in analyzing any distracting thoughts. Work on using these three types of fabrication to make your concentration as solid as you can. After a while, though, as you get skilled at these types of fabrication and you feel solid in the present moment, you can turn and look at whatever in the thought seemed so attractive. You can start analyzing the thought in terms of the three types of fabrication: How are you breathing in relation to the thought? What things are you saying to yourself that give rise, say, to greed or aversion or delusion? What are the perceptions or mental labels lying behind these thoughts? And what kind of feelings surround them? Can you change those things? Fabricate something different—so that when an incident comes up in your life that you would normally react to with anger, can you refabricate your reaction? Something that would give rise to lust: Can you refabricate that, so that the aversion, the anger, the lust don't hold any appeal?

Two things help to cut through that appeal. First, simply having access to a greater sense of well-being as you work with the breath and play with the breath, gives the mind's sense of hunger—just wanting some action, wanting some entertainment—less of an edge. Second, you see that the way you normally react is optional; it's causing stress that doesn't need to be there. You see that you're creating an awful lot of the situation just by the way you're looking at it, and if it's causing stress, well, why not look at it in a different way? Why not breathe around it in a different way? Perceive it in a different way. Evaluate it in a different way.

These are some of the lessons you can learn by working and playing with the breath like this: allowing the mind to become more firmly settled in the present and to see things a lot more clearly. You come to understand this process of how you fabricate your experience, and you can use that understanding to eliminate all the stress that the fabrication creates for the mind. This is one of the Buddha's major insights.

There's an analysis of suffering and stress called dependent co-arising, which describes all the different factors that, based on ignorance, give rise to stress and suffering. Half of them, including the three types of fabrication, come prior to sensory contact. Even before you see something or hear something, the mind is already primed to create suffering out of it—if it's operating under the power of ignorance. What we're doing here is learning how to bring knowledge to those processes so that we're no longer priming ourselves for suffering and stress. We're priming ourselves to put an end to it.

Which is in line with our original intention: We want to be able to see why the actions we do for the sake of happiness end up leading to stress and how we can change those ways, so that we can actually act in a way that leads to true happiness. We break things down into very simple components so that we can manage them. We realize that this *is* a problem we can manage. That's the good news of the Buddha's teachings: that even though we may be causing ourselves stress and suffering, we can put an end to it. If our suffering really were caused by things outside that were beyond our power, then there'd be no hope.

Or if it were caused by things we were doing that we couldn't change, there'd be no hope, either. But here we're making choices. We're probably not making them all that wisely, but we do have some wisdom. We do have some discernment. It's just a matter of applying it, giving it a foundation here in the present moment, and then really using it to look carefully to see: Where are we creating unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves? What can we do to change? It's by using our wisdom and discernment with these basic, immediate things, exercising them with these questions, that they develop and grow.

When the mind is well-settled and well-centered like this, it fosters a sense of

well-being. That sense of well-being is important. If, when you're feeling down on yourself and you're already feeling uncomfortable inside, you'll do nothing but criticize yourself, and that can be a dead end. But when the mind feels at ease, with a sense of fullness and well-being here in the present moment, then you can bring up the fact that you've got some habits here that are not all that skillful, and you're in the mood to tell yourself, "Let's do something about them." The mind is then a lot more willing to listen and to work on the problem.

So these are our basic skills. These are our basic components into which we break things down so that we can understand how we can put them back together in a better way. Then the things that we tend to cling to, the habits we tend to fall into over and over again that are leading to suffering and stress: We can take them apart. We can then put everything back together again in a better way that turns into a path that, unlike our normal life, doesn't just keep going around and around and around and around in feedback loops. This is a path that actually goes someplace: someplace that's really worth going to. And here again, this is where conviction is important.

The state the Buddha described as health, nibbana, is something he can't pull out of his heart to show to us. So we're not in a position where we can wait to accept things only when we know them for sure. We have to bring some conviction to what he says. On the one hand, we have to take his word for it when he talks about the kind of commitment it requires. On the other hand, he doesn't have the role of being a god who can tell us what we have to do. But he does say he's an expert in putting an end to suffering. That requires some conviction on our part. But it's not a conviction devoid of reason: What he says is very reasonable. But to follow him requires a lot of commitment. It's a path that requires an awful lot of attention and a lot of persistence, patience. You really do have to commit yourself to this.

We're working on a big problem, and it takes time and effort to break the big problem down to manageable bits so we can understand: "Oh, this is why I've been doing this all along. And here's an alternative."

So the path does ask a lot, but it offers a lot as well. And if you think of the alternative—just continuing to suffer again and again in your old ways—it makes sense to give this path a sincere and serious try.

Responsible for Your Goodness

May 19, 2012

Each time you sit down to meditate, remind yourself that this is the most important thing you can be doing right now. It's the most important skill you can develop in your life: the ability to drop all your other concerns and focus on what really is your responsibility, which is the shape of your mind.

It's so easy for us to talk about how we're responsible for things outside, and that *is* part of our goodness. But where does that goodness come from? If you're responsible for things outside and yet are doing a horrible job, creating suffering for yourself or suffering for other people, it's nothing to be proud of.

You have to give precedence to the state of your mind so that you can take care of your responsibilities well. But the state of your mind isn't something that's going to be good on its own. It needs training. It needs nourishment, the proper kind of nourishment. All too often we nourish ourselves with thoughts of our own importance, or thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of who knows what. And that kind of food is not necessarily good for the mind because often those thoughts can poison whatever goodness we may have.

The Buddha gives an example of someone who's practicing concentration and starts thinking about how his concentration is better than other people's concentration. And that right there spoils it. This tendency doesn't apply only to concentration. It can apply to anything else you do in life. You do it well but then you build up a lot of pride around it. It's like taking good nourishing food and then sprinkling arsenic or bits of rotten fish over the top.

For the goodness of the mind really to be good it has to come from within: from a sense of its own inner sufficiency, its own inner strength, its ability to nourish itself properly. And then whatever goodness it does outside will just naturally come. It's a natural expression of the mind. It's more likely to be right for the occasion and not harmful to anyone. So to really be responsible you have to take responsibility for this, the state of your mind, right now, and your ability to protect it, look after it.

That means you have to give it a lot of attention. It also means you have to be willing to put aside a lot of other connections in your life.

When Luang Pu Uthai was here these last couple of days, that was one of the things he repeated over and over again: our need to be quiet, the need for

restraint, the need to focus on what really is our responsibility, which is the shape of our mind. No one else can do this work for us. You see this when you're dealing with other people. People you love are suffering, and there's something in them that you can't reach—as when someone is really, really sick, or really miserable and really depressed, and yet you just can't reach them. Or someone is dying. You realize that if that person had taken care of his or her own mind, he or she wouldn't be suffering, and we would be suffering a lot less. We wouldn't be worried for them.

Which means that one thing we can do now for the people who will be around us when we die is to develop skill in nourishing the state of our mind.

So this is your number one responsibility, the shape of your mind right now. And the goodness of the mind is something that doesn't need to be decorated. It doesn't have to have a lot of pride or conceit or anything. You may need to develop a certain amount of pride or conceit as you're working on these skills, but as the skills get better and better, you find that pride and conceit are really unnecessary, and they get in the way. You can put them aside because the goodness of the mind in and of itself is its reward.

So we focus on the breath to try to bring the mind first to what the Buddha calls a state of seclusion. Put aside any unskillful thoughts that come up. Try not to get entangled with any concern that they're arising as a blemish on your ego. What the hell, they're here, but you don't have to get involved with them. They're going to come but then they're going to go. You just don't have to get involved. And you learn how to pull away from them. It's not that you're in denial about them, it's just that you don't have to participate in whatever stories they want to get you involved in. You see them come and then you just watch them go. You've got a place to stand here with the breath, apart from them, so try to make the breath as comfortable as possible.

This is your nourishment along the way to getting the mind in really good shape. This is the energy field in the body that allows the breath to come in, allows it to go out. It nourishes the nerves, nourishes the blood vessels, and allows the body to move. It's our most direct experience of the body, and yet we tend to look past it. We tend to see the solidity of the body as prior, and then wonder how we can get breath to go through the solidity. Actually the breath is already there. As far as our awareness is concerned, the breath is primary. It comes first. The reason why healthy breath energy is nourishing to the mind is because it's so near to the mind. It fills your awareness of the body with a sense of comfortable energy. That energy becomes the medium through which you experience every other aspect of the body.

When that sense of well-being nourishes the mind, you're in a much better position to look at your own drawbacks and not get ensnared in all the stories

and back-and-forth recriminations that usually build up when you notice you've been doing something unskillful. That's because you now realize you don't have to identify with those things. They're just there. Causes have created them, and when the causes are removed they'll go away. Of course, one of the big causes that keeps these things going is that you're paying attention to them. You want to get involved in them. So you learn how not to pay attention to them. You starve them. Then all these distractions and other things that pull you away from centering in on the mind don't have a foundation. They slip away, slip away.

Part of the mind will say that you're missing out on something important, but although it's true that there's a lot in the world that you're missing, you're not really missing anything important if you haven't taken care of the mind first. This is your top responsibility. You can't put it off to when you're old. You can't put it off to weekends or to next year's retreat. You've got to deal with it every day, because the mind can create trouble every day.

So you've got to keep riding herd on it. But riding herd doesn't mean that you're harassing it or causing it to suffer. You're actually giving it a sense of well-being and learning how to protect it, how to foster a sense of its value. This is where all our goodness comes from. This is where the potential for the end of suffering comes from. The suffering that we're creating with our minds, right now, is the problem. So you've got to solve the problem where the cause is.

And it turns out that in the midst of this cause there's something that's deathless. Only it doesn't lie in the "midst" of things. It's a different dimension. It's out of space and time. But it's contacted right here. The Buddha doesn't talk much about it. He says it's something you realize by doing the practice.

We were talking today about trying to get our heads around the idea of what this deathlessness might be like. But it's not something you get your head around. You try to get your head around suffering so you can comprehend it to the point where you can develop dispassion for the things that make you cling to it. As for the cause of suffering, you try to get your head around it enough to abandon it. But the end of suffering, the cessation of suffering, is not something to comprehend. You discover it. It's there. And regardless of how wonderful your theories are about it or how accurate your ideas may be about it, there's no way they can touch the actual reality of this potential, this dimension.

But we *can* talk about developing the path, using the strength we gain from concentration to look into the ways in which we're causing suffering, and learning how to abandon them.

We do this by looking into the most paradoxical habit of the mind, which is that it likes to create suffering. We don't understand why this is happening. We want happiness, we want pleasure, and yet the things we do end up creating so

much suffering. We're *attached* to things that are causing suffering because we don't see the connection—or if we see the connection, we don't think there's any alternative.

So when the Buddha talks about the path, it's to remind us that there are alternatives. Good ones. And when he does talk about the cessation of suffering, he tells us enough to let us know that it's really there and it's really good and it's really worth going for. It's much better than all the other ideas we have about who we are or how great or important we are, or how horrible we are: all these stories where, whether we think we're good or bad, we're making ourselves the hero, we're making ourselves the heroine—none of which are helpful. You need to look into the state of your mind right now. How is it dealing with itself? How is it dealing with its thoughts? Its cravings? How is it dealing with the good parts of the mind? What is it doing to maintain them, to give them importance? Those are the questions you really want to ask and those are the ones you want to focus on answering.

Because by focusing on them, you can find something really good in the mind. When you've got that real goodness, then you don't have to create all the artificial forms of goodness that we build around ourselves, our self-image, our idea of how important we are in this way or that.

This then gets reflected in the way we're generous. The Buddha talks about how the different levels of generosity that come along as we're practicing get higher and higher until finally we get to the state of awakening. Then generosity is just a natural ornament of the mind. In other words, the goodness we do for other people at that point isn't done because we want something out of them, or because we want something out of being good. When the mind has taken care of all of its needs, when it's taken care of all of its inner responsibilities, then everything that's left is a pure gift.

This is why this, your state of mind, should take priority. As for anything that gets in the way, anything that distracts you from this, you've got to put it aside for the time being.

It's like learning a musical instrument. You have to be willing to go off and practice for hours and hours and hours by yourself. You're not playing for anybody else. It may sound like you're being selfish, but No, you're learning how to get really good at what you're doing, so that when the time comes and you actually do go out on the stage, you've got something good to offer. You've got something good for people to listen to.

Like the Buddha: He left his family, and many people get upset about that, thinking he was a deadbeat dad. But you have to remember that one of the ways that a husband or father could provide for his family in those days was to go out

on an expedition, go out exploring, and to come back with a treasure. Sometimes it would take years. In this case, the Buddha came back with a really great treasure: the treasure of the deathless. So even though he had to isolate himself from his family—and it did cause them some grief; he himself found it hard to leave them—still, he knew that he had to. And when he came back, he had something that more than compensated for those six or seven years.

So remember this when you find that the demands of the practice pull you away from your family or your friends. It may look like you're being irresponsible, but you're actually taking care of your number one responsibility. And when you do that, everybody benefits.

Whether anybody else appreciates that fact doesn't matter. You know that this is what you've got to do.

A Meditator is a Good Friend to Have

April 16, 2012

Take some long deep in-and-out breaths. Have the sense that the breath is sweeping through your whole body, from the top of the head down to the tips of your toes. Try to notice where there are any patterns of tension in the body. Allow them to relax and let the breath sweep right through them. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels really comfortable. You can experiment for a while, to see what kind of breathing feels most refreshing. Sometimes shorter breathing is what the body needs, sometimes longer, sometimes deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Try to keep on top of whatever the body needs. As for any other thoughts that may come into your awareness, just let them go.

We're trying to sensitize ourselves to what's going on in the body and to how the breath can help. It's an area of our awareness that we tend to ignore because we're too interested with things outside to notice what we're doing inside.

When they talk about things being unconscious or subconscious, it's not that there's a basement in the mind where whatever happens has to be unconscious and in the dark. It's simply that we're not paying attention. Thoughts go flitting through the mind and then leave an imprint on the body. Or events in the body can have an impact on the mind. All too often, if we're not aware of this, the tension builds up and results in a sense of being burdened, being weighed down. The Buddha's essential insight is that much of that being burdened or weighed down is totally unnecessary. In fact, none of it is necessary. There may be stress in the body, but it doesn't need to have an impact on the mind.

As the Buddha says, when people are in physical pain, it's as if they were shot by an arrow. And then they shoot themselves again with another arrow: the sense of being burdened or victimized by the pain. That image has always struck me as a little too weak. We don't shoot ourselves with just one extra arrow. We shoot ourselves with many more arrows, a whole quiver of arrows. And of course the act of shooting ourselves with those arrows makes the original pain even worse, to say nothing of all the pain of the extra arrows. So no wonder we feel burdened all the time. No wonder we feel victimized, or at the very least that something is wrong.

So what we do when we meditate is that, instead of looking for the answer

outside, we look for the answer inside. "What are we doing here that's adding all that unnecessary pain?" This is not a selfish question. If you can stop adding that extra pain to your own mind, you're less burdened and you're less of a burden on others. You can actually start paying attention to how other people are getting along. This part of the practice tends to be under-appreciated, but meditators are really good friends to have, precisely because they've learned how not to weigh themselves down all the time. When they're not weighed down, they can actually be of more help to others.

When pain comes along, whether it's physical or mental, they realize that they don't have to take it personally. There's a passage in the Canon where the monks are talking, and one of them, Ven. Sariputta, says, "You know, I was thinking today: Is there anything in the world whose change would cause me grief? I couldn't think of anything at all." And Ven. Ananda, another one of the monks, says, "But what if something happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that cause you grief?" And Sariputta replies, "No, I'd reflect on the fact that he was a great human being and had been very helpful to many, and it's a sad thing he couldn't live on. But I wouldn't feel any personal grief around that." And Ananda says, "That's a sign that your conceit has gone"—"conceit" here meaning not necessarily pride, or arrogance, but more a sense of who you are and how you take things personally. If you can be in a difficult situation and not take the loss or change personally, you're actually more helpful to others than you would be otherwise.

I've seen many cases where people are crying over someone who is about to die. And a lot of the crying has to do with how much they're going to miss that person, how much grief they feel. That's not all that helpful to the person who's dying. The best gift you can give to someone else who is in trouble is that you've taken care of your habit of personalizing the grief, of focusing on how much you're going to feel the loss, how much you're going to feel deprived. Once you've gotten past those issues, you can look more carefully: What does this person need? How can I be of help?

We were talking today about helping someone who's dying. The first thing the Buddha said is to try to make sure that the person isn't worried. There are two cases in the Canon. One is of a woman whose husband seems to be on his deathbed. So she goes and tells him, "Don't worry about me. I'll be able to take care of myself when you're gone. Don't worry about my financial situation. Don't worry about my turning away from the Dhamma. In fact, I'll be going to the monastery even more now. So put your mind at rest."

And it turns out that the husband doesn't die, at least not then. He recovers and he goes to tell the Buddha what his wife told him. The Buddha replies, "Do you realize how fortunate you are that you have such a wise wife who has your

best interest in mind?"

There's a similar case where one of the Buddha's cousins, Mahanama, learns that the Buddha's going to go away at the end of the rains retreat. So he asks the Buddha what to do, what to say, if anybody is dying while he's gone. "What should I tell him?" And the Buddha says, "The first thing to tell him is to not worry about his family: 'Regardless of the situation, the fact that you're worried now isn't going to help anybody. So drop those thoughts from your mind.'" But the Buddha doesn't just leave the person there. He then tells Mahanama to ask, "Are you worried also about the sensual pleasures you're going to be leaving?" If the person says Yes, then Mahanama should say, "Try to set your mind on higher levels of being where the sensual pleasures are more refined." In this way, he should keep advising the person to take his thoughts all the way through even higher and higher levels, until he gets to the Brahma world, where the pleasure is the same pleasure we gain from a really concentrated mind. If the person can keep that up, then the Buddha says to tell him to let go even of that type of pleasure. That, too, is impermanent. The sense of identity you would build around that is impermanent, too. Let go of it. If the person can follow you all that way, then he or she can gain total release from all kinds of suffering. That's a huge gift you can give to someone who's dying.

It's not always the case that the person dying can follow you that far. It generally would require someone who's got a good meditative background, but you never know. Still, your first duty always is to try to pull that person away from any worries and then advise them to set their minds on something good. It could be the good things they've done in the past—which doesn't mean the good times they've had, because that gets people sentimental and that can get them really upset.

Instead, have them think about the times they were generous, the times they were virtuous. If they have any meditative background, try to remind them of that. Give them something good to hold onto. This means that you're not putting your own sense of loss in the way of really helping them.

This is why a meditator can be a really good friend: someone who really is concerned with your welfare, who is not only thinking of his or her own sense of loss, or sense of pain, and who is not being burdened by those extra arrows.

In my own case, many of the people in my family wondered what good it was to have a monk in the family. But then one year my father went through a severe depression. I was in Thailand and only after several months was I able to make my way back home. Within a couple of weeks, after talking to my father and letting him talk, he was out of the depression. This was after my brothers had been trying for months to help him. That's when one of my brothers said, "You know, it really is good to have a Buddhist monk in the family." Of course, you

don't have to be a monk: Anyone who has trained his or her own mind is a good person to have in the family, a good person to have as a friend.

So as you're meditating here remind yourselves: It's not just for us that we're doing this. We're doing this so we can also be a help to others. The less we burden ourselves with our own sufferings, the stronger we'll be. If we're not carrying huge loads around, then when we find somebody else carrying a heavy load, we have free hands to help them put their burden down. In that way, your training in good friendship can continue. As the Buddha says, you try to look for good friends, people you can rely on—not only so that you can gain their help, but also so that you can learn from them what it means to be a good friend. In that way you can pass on the gift.

Strengthening Conviction

January 1, 2012

Meditating, strengthening the mind, is very similar to strengthening the body. You have some strength to begin with, and you use that strength to develop further strength. In Thai, the word for exercising is *awk kamlang*, which means to put forth energy. And in putting it forth, you gain something in return. So as you meditate, you have to use what strengths you already have if you're going to gain further strength.

There are five strengths altogether in the standard list: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The fact that conviction comes first shows that it's important. As one of my teachers in Thailand once said, you notice that the list leading up to discernment doesn't start with concepts or ideas. It starts with conviction. Discernment comes from conviction—provided, of course, that it's conviction in the right things.

Traditionally, this means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that it's not just one of those facts out there in history. It's a fact with implications for what you're doing right here and right now: the idea that someone, through his efforts, could find true happiness. And his ability to find that happiness was based on the qualities of mind that were not peculiar to him. They're qualities that we all have, to at least some extent, in a potential form. The implication there, of course, is that if he can do it, you can do it, too. Because he found this way and was expert in gaining that freedom, you treat his words the way you would treat an expert's words. Not necessarily something that you're forced to believe; you simply trust that because he knew what he was doing, his explanations of how to do it deserve some special respect.

So there are a lot of implications to having conviction in the Buddha's awakening. And, of course, there's going to be a part of the mind that resists this. After all, his story could be just one of those many stories that come from the past —and we've heard lots of those—and maybe it wasn't transmitted properly. Maybe the principles that he said were universal actually applied only in his culture.

There are lots of ways that we can develop doubts and uncertainty about the path. So let's look at how the Buddha said to deal with uncertainty.

First, of course, you ask yourself: What are you being asked to believe?

You're being asked to believe that your actions have an impact.

That the quality of the mind with which you act is going to have an impact on the results of that action.

That it's possible to learn from your mistakes.

And that you do have freedom of choice.

These are all fairly commonsensical propositions. Where the Buddha is asking you to take this a little bit further than normal common sense, of course, is that by following this principle you can go all the way to true happiness, a happiness that won't change.

The first principle, that your actions have an impact, is very easy to accept. That's why we act to begin with. Still, though, it's interesting: There's part of the mind that, many times, would rather that its actions *not* have results, especially when you know you're doing something unskillful. So you have to ask yourself: What is the state of mind that would want to doubt these things? Is it a state of mind that you can trust?

Sometimes that state of mind is just a matter of your own defilements: your own greed, your own aversion, your own laziness, your own delusion. Sometimes those attitudes are fortified by ideas we've picked up from our culture.

There's an awful lot in Western culture that goes against the Dhamma. It teaches you that greed is good, that true happiness is impossible, that the happiness that can be bought is good enough. It teaches you that if you don't follow your sensual desires, you'll end up twisted and mentally unbalanced.

There's a lot in Western culture, that feeds on our greed, aversion, and delusion, that encourages our greed, aversion, and delusion. Like that cartoon in *The New Yorker* several years ago: A man is standing in front of a magazine rack, and the names of the magazines are all the seven deadly sins. Or like the billboard that used to be on I-15 North: "Las Vegas—seven deadly sins, one convenient location." Our culture encourages these things.

So when you start to have doubts about the practice or become uncertain about the practice, you have to ask yourself: Whose values are speaking? And what's the quality of the mind that's speaking here? You want to step back from these things. It's not that you don't listen to your doubts at all, but you do want to figure out which doubts are coming from honest uncertainty, and which are coming from other agendas. Which of these voices do you want to identify with?

Of course, there's the simple doubt of not knowing. But you also have to realize that if you wait for true knowledge, absolute, certain knowledge to come to you on a platter, you're going to die first. We live in a world of uncertainties. We have to take gambles as to what effort will be worth expending to get a reward—in terms of pleasure, well-being, satisfaction—that's commensurate with

the effort we put in. This is a part of human life that makes us uncomfortable. Most of us don't like to think about how much we're taking on faith as we go through the day. Even just believing that the world is going to go on as it has been: There's no guarantee.

You have to realize that there's always going to be an element of uncertainty as you make choices in life. This is where you have to balance what seems to be a safe choice as opposed to an unsafe one; a likely choice as opposed to an unlikely one; a noble choice as opposed to an ignoble one. When you look at the Buddha's teachings, they fit all the right criteria: They're safe, noble, and likely. It's likely, for example, there is a pattern to the principle of cause and effect. Even if it doesn't work out that that is the way things are, when you've followed the Buddha's instructions for exploring this issue, you've developed good qualities in the present moment. There's a certain sense of satisfaction coming from that, a certain sense of nobility that you've acted on your higher impulses rather than on your lower ones.

So you have to be willing to commit to some things before you learn any undeniable truth. This is a principle that Ajaan Lee repeats over and over again: that you have to *be* true in order to *find* truth. You have to say: "I'm really going to give myself to this particular course of action, this particular way of approaching life, and then see what comes out as a result." You have to give it time; you have to give it energy. Without expending the energy, you're not going to get the strength of conviction in return.

And so you look around. Who are the people who followed this path in the past? In my own case, one of the things that really convinced me that this is something worth looking into was meeting Ajaan Fuang. I remember when I had first learned about Buddhism, the idea that someone could practice to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion sounded like practicing to be a dead person. It didn't sound attractive at all. But then, in meeting Ajaan Fuang, I met someone who had devoted his life to the path. He was very alive, very alert, very wise. He inspired a lot of trust. And as he said, this wasn't how he had started in life. He said he owed it all to the training.

I compared him to the other people I'd known, other possible ways I could live my life, and his seemed the most likely to show good results. It was a risk with a lot of uncertainties, but I felt inspired by his example.

This is why it's good to read the stories of the ajaans, people in the recent past who have given their lives to the practice. Sometimes it's easier to relate to people who live closer to us in time—although if you read the *Theragatha* and *Therigatha*, you realize that the problems people face in training their minds are not so different now from what they were back around the Buddha's time.

So you look at the life of those who have practiced and then you give it a good try. Notice which qualities of the mind the Buddha says are unskillful, which are skillful. Learn to recognize the skillful ones, recognize the unskillful ones in your own mind, so you can develop skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones, and see what happens.

This is not the sort of thing that you just try on weekends. You ask yourself: If you don't give yourself to this kind of life, this kind of practice, this kind of belief, what kind of belief are you giving yourself to? What habits are you training yourself in? We don't usually think about that. We just live our ordinary lives and don't particularly think of it as a training in any way. But maybe we're training ourselves in laziness or complacency. Maybe we're training ourselves in an unwillingness to commit. Is that something you want to train in?

What it comes down to is the fact that we're always making choices. All too often we don't really realize what we're choosing. So at the very least this question—"Do you want to place your faith in the Buddha's awakening?"—forces you to realize that you already are making choices, you already are training the mind in one direction or another. Then the question becomes: Is it the direction that you want to go? What kind of hope does that direction hold out? The Buddha's direction holds out the hope that maybe there really is a true happiness that's not dependent on conditions, that's not going to leave you because of aging, illness, or death. If you want to find out if that is a genuine possibility, there's only one way to do it: Do whatever the path requires. That's the only way you're going to know.

So do you want to know this? Whether this is true or not? That's what it comes down to. Or are there other things you'd rather know? Things that strike you as more important? More desirable? That's the kind of question we all have to ask ourselves. The problem is that, all too often, we pretend that the question has already been answered without our having to do anything, without our having to put anything out, to expend any energy or any effort. But we're always putting energy into something. Why not put it into something that holds out the promise of something special?

This is one way of overcoming your doubts: seeing when you put energy into something and asking yourself what kind of results you're getting. Are they the kind of results that you want? Are they commensurate with the energy you're putting into them? What kind of happiness would really satisfy you? What vision would you like to have for the possibilities of human life? If it includes the possibility of a true happiness, then this is the path that works. If you just listen to the words, you won't know. But this is the path that provides that possibility. And it's up to you to decide whether you want to test it or not—keeping in mind Ajaan Lee's words: that it's through being true that we find the truth.

Generating Energy

January 2, 2012

In Thailand they sometimes compare practicing meditation to flying a kite. It takes a fair amount of effort to get the kite up in the air, until it finally catches the wind, but then it doesn't take much effort anymore. The energy of the practice, at that point, keeps feeding itself.

Now, in Thai, the phrase "catching the wind," is actually a play on words. Because the word for "wind" and the word for "breath" are the same word, *lom*. So when you practice, when you finally get to the breath, and it feels easiest to stay with the breath, that's when you've caught the wind. The practice picks up its own momentum. The tricky part, of course, is getting the kite up into the air, getting to the point where the energy you put into the practice gets less and less, and the practice itself produces the energy you need.

It's something you'll find at various stages in the practice—it doesn't simply happen once and for all—that you catch the wind and then have no more problems. Sometimes the kites will fall down, and you have to get them back up in the air. So it's good to know some ways of generating energy so that you'll be able to get things up in the air, to catch the wind again.

When the Buddha discusses persistence in the five strengths, it builds on conviction. That's one of the mental ways of giving rise to more energy. Another is in the context of the seven factors for awakening, where persistence builds on mindfulness: keeping something in mind. So what are the ways of giving rise to conviction that are going to energize you, and what are the things you have to keep in mind that will give rise to more energy?

In the seven factors for awakening, the Buddha talks about qualities that act as a foothold for the energy or the potential for energy, but then he doesn't explain what they are. This is where you have to look around in yourself. This is also where you have to learn from others—that's the part you have to keep in mind.

It essentially comes down to two sorts of sources: sources within the mind and sources within the body. In terms of the body, you may want to look at the way you're breathing, because there are some very peaceful and calm ways of breathing that actually deplete the energy in your body. So if you find that your energy level is low, what can you do to change the way you breathe? Try to notice

which parts of the body seem to be overworked, the ones that are doing all the work in the breathing, but don't seem to be getting any refreshment from the breath. Consciously relax those parts and say: If the body is going to breathe in, other parts will have to take over, but these parts are going to stay relaxed, regardless. And you'll find that other parts of the body will pitch in. Watch that for a while. See if the way they're breathing actually does improve the energy in the body.

Sometimes you have to remind yourself that the body is, as you directly experience it from within, all breath. Whatever sensation comes up, think of it as an aspect of breath energy, and then ask yourself: Is that healthy breath energy or not? If it were healthy, what would it feel like? Because sometimes you hold in mind the perception that a sensation is solid, and you put up with all kinds of stuff from solidity that you wouldn't put up with if you thought this was breath. Then conversely, there are times when you feel a need for something really solid and grounding to get your energy going. So you have to play with your perceptions here, to see which perceptions of what's going on in the body can actually be helpful.

There are parts of the body that you may be suppressing, that could actually be a source of energy. Ajaan Lee talks of the breath that goes up the spine, and the breath that goes up the centerline in the front of the torso. Do you have any room for that kind of breath energy in your concept of the way you breathe? Or do you squash it? Or when you're feeling tired, which parts of the body are you focusing on as feeling tired? Then check to see which parts are actually okay. Switch your perception around to the parts that are okay. See what that does.

In other words, realize that there are pockets of energy in the body—and not just *in* the body, all around you. Ajaan Lee talks about the elements that surround the body and can give nourishment to it. Sometimes these elements can come into the different chakras, or the different resting points of the breath, as Ajaan Lee calls them. Think of an energy outside the body coming in and nourishing the point in the middle of the chest, nourishing the point in the middle of your head, any point that seems to need extra energy. Tap into the energies around you. There are some good ones. Learn how to recognize the good ones that feel refreshing as soon as you allow them in.

So there are potentials there that you may not have thought about. And it's good to remember that there are those possibilities there. That's what mindfulness is for.

As for energy that comes from the mind, the Buddha talks about gladdening the mind: thinking about topics that give rise to a sense of inspiration. These can be the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, your own generosity, your own virtue. Sometimes putting the breath aside for the time being and thinking about

these things can be very helpful. Thinking about the Sangha for instance: Think about all the ajaans and the success they had in the practice. Remember that they were human beings, you're a human being. They could do it, you can do it. This is the message they always give.

One of the purposes of this is to dig out any attitudes you may be holding that are actually harmful, that actually sap your energy—such as the attitude that "I probably won't be able to get anywhere in this lifetime. I'll just muddle around a little bit, and I hope that things will go better next time around." Ask yourself if part of your mind is holding onto that. And why would it want to hold onto that? It might be that it doesn't want to put out too much effort, or you don't want to set the bar too high. But what you're doing as you set the bar low is beating yourself down with the bar. If you're more open to the possibility that, Yes, you could attain one of the noble attainments in this lifetime, does that energize you? Does it scare you? Look into that.

Another contemplation that can give rise to energy is the contemplation of death: realizing that you don't know when death is going to come, or how it's going to come. All these prophecies have been floating around about the year 2012, the end of the world, the reverse of the magnetic poles or whatever. But you may not even live to see the end of the world. Something might happen before then. This is not meant to get you depressed. It's meant to motivate you to realize that important things need to be done in the mind right now. If aging, illness and death come—or, rather, *when* they come—what qualities of mind are you going to need?

You see some people as they approach death, and they just get totally thrown off balance. They can't even allow themselves to think about the future, for the future holds nothing but an empty blank for them. And if they had a bad past, that's something they don't want to think about either. I think this is one of the reasons that dementia often flares up as death approaches. You don't know where to focus your mind. Well, if you have a meditation practice, you know you can focus right here at the breath. Maintain this awareness of the present moment so that the mind doesn't go flailing around. You're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, you're going to need as much concentration and discernment as you can muster.

And when are you going to develop those qualities if you don't develop them now? Right now is an ideal opportunity. You're sitting here meditating. It's quiet around you. One of the contemplations the Buddha has the monks reflect on—and it's one of the ones King Asoka recommended in one of his edicts—is to think about future dangers. Aging, illness, and death can come; social unrest can come; a split in the Sangha can come. If you tell yourself, "Well, I'll just wait until my next lifetime," he warns that the Dhamma and the Vinaya are going to

deteriorate over time. The opportunities don't get better. They get worse. So you make use of the opportunities you have now. In this case, you're motivating yourself with a little bit of fear: the wise kind of fear, the fear that's related to compunction and heedfulness.

So it's up to you to observe what you need to think about to motivate yourself to practice. Sometimes you need the positive side of the encouragement, so you hold out a carrot. But sometimes you need the stick to remind yourself that if you don't do the work now, it's not going to get easier. They've done studies of people who are really expert in physical skills and they've discovered that these people have the ability to motivate themselves using both types of motivation: a strong sense of the harm that can be done if you don't master the skill, and a strong sense of the benefits that can come when you do. So you have to learn how to deal with your own mind, and when one method of motivation isn't working, remember you've got other possibilities, other choices, other tools in your kit.

What it comes down to is that you try to find sources of energy in the body, and sources of energy in the way you think, that you can then channel into your mindfulness, alertness, and concentration, that give more ardency to the practice, so that the kite can get up in the air. Ideally when your energy turns into right effort, one of the results is rapture: refreshment, a sense of well-being that then becomes food for the concentration. This is when the kite finally catches the wind. You're focused on the breath in the way that gives rise to a sense of fullness, and then you feed off of that, so that you can stay with it more consistently, with a greater sense of solidity, stability.

So remember that right effort is not just a matter of brute force. It requires your ingenuity and your intelligence, your ability to find sources of energy that you've overlooked or that you've been squashing. Look at the way you think, look at the way you breathe, look at the way you hold your body. See if there's anything you can change. Any ways of thinking that are keeping you down, learn to question them. Any ways of breathing that are stifling your energy, just drop them. Ask yourself: Which parts of the body are getting starved of energy? Where is some energy in another part of the body that can help nourish them? If it can't be found in the body, remind yourself there's energy around the body, so tap into that.

This is what mindfulness is good for: to remember that you've got these potential sources. Don't forget them. The skill lies in learning how to put them to use, so that the kite gets up into the wind, and the energy can feed on itself to keep the practice going, making it steadier and more reliable, with mindfulness feeding your persistence, and persistence feeding your mindfulness. That way, both of them do become what they call dominant factors in the mind.

Success by Approximation

September 30, 2013

When the Buddha taught the path, he said it leads to awakening; it leads to nibbana. But he didn't list awakening or nibbana as one of the factors of the path. The goal is one thing; the path is something else. That's why he used the image of a path. And unlike the relationship between craving and suffering, the path isn't the cause or the origination of the goal. It simply leads you there.

These points are important to keep in mind because all too often there's a tendency to think that you can get to awakening by cloning it. But awakening isn't something you can clone.

Instead, the Buddha has you think strategically. What actions can you do to bring yourself to the point where you arrive at awakening? They're very different from the awakening itself. There are *some* similarities. Concentration is very calm; wisdom is very clear; virtue can be pure. But their calm, clarity, and purity are all fabricated, whereas the calm, clarity, and purity of the goal are on another level altogether. You get there not by imitating the goal; you get there through a process of approximation.

Even though awakening can happen in a moment, and you're awakening to something that's potentially right here in the present moment, you still have to develop your discernment to detect these things, and that takes time. You have to develop your skill. As with any skill, it's going to go through levels of refinement. And it includes factors that are very different from the goal—things like the desire of right effort, which entails wanting to do things skillfully. And even though we're here to get rid of aversion, there has to be a certain amount of aversion, too. To begin with, you have to be averse toward the results of unskillful behavior. That aversion will eventually have to get honed down. But just because it's there doesn't mean that you're going in the wrong direction. You're learning how to approximate things.

It's as if we're digging for gold underground. You don't dig for gold with a gold shovel; you use an iron shovel or a steel one. Or it's like trying to get fresh water out of salt water. The salt water may be cool, and you want cool, fresh water when you drink it. But you don't go straight from cool salt water to the cool fresh water. You have to take it through heat first; you heat the water and distill it. Then it can cool down again.

So there are parts of the path where you really have to put in energy, and that's going to require desire. You're making concentration: creating a state of concentration in the mind. You're creating a state of becoming, in which you take on the identity of someone doing concentration in the world of the mind. That, too, requires desire. It's simply a matter of learning how to refine your sensitivity as to what's skillful and what's not. Which kinds of desires are skillful, and which kinds of desires are not? Which kinds of skillful qualities are appropriate for one particular situation, and which ones are appropriate for another?

Remember the teaching on the seven factors for awakening. The factor of mindfulness is always useful, but the other factors are meant to be emphasized at some times and not at others. The calming ones are useful for when the mind is feeling frenetic; the energizing ones, for when the mind is feeling sluggish. So even with skillful qualities, you have to learn how to make distinctions. Beyond that, there are levels of concentration, levels of equanimity, levels of right view. These things will progress as you go on the path, until the mind is totally free of passion and aversion. But to get there, you have to be passionate about the path. And your initial motivation may have a bit of aversion in it. You're averse to suffering: That's fine.

You read about some of the ajaans in Thailand talking about how they used some fairly unskillful mind states to deal with other unskillful mind states. Now as Ven. Ananda once pointed out, some unskillful mind states are totally useless on the path. Sexual desire is one that's totally off the path. As he said, the Buddha cut the bridge to that one; it plays no role on the path at all. Sensual passion of any sort doesn't play any role on the path. But there are other things related to conceit and craving that *are* necessary. You have to want the goal, and you have to have the confidence you're good enough to do it.

Now conceit and craving bring with them some unskillful side effects; and as the path goes on, you're going to pare those down. But if you've got them, learn how to use them in a proper way. Ajaan Lee tells of how, when he was a young monk, he would get into meditation contests with the other monks to see who could sit the longest or do walking meditation the longest. And even though it was fairly childish, it still taught him some important lessons on how to sit and walk for long periods of time. It taught him patience and endurance.

Other ajaans talk about getting angry at their defilements, and that's perfectly fine. As you get more skilled, you begin to see where the anger is unnecessary and then you can drop it. But don't get waylaid by the type of thinking that criticizes you for being awfully passionate about your practice, or awfully attached to concentration, or awfully negative about a person you don't want to associate with. Well, if you realize that associating with that kind of person is going to take

you off the path, you've got to be careful. Heedfulness requires that you learn to be wary.

We're often taught that the Dhamma's all about trusting. And it's true that you have to learn how to trust the Buddha and trust your desire for true happiness. But there are things you have to be wary of, both inside and out. I mean, that's what heedfulness means. So we're not being unkind when we decide that certain relationships have to be put on hold. And we haven't wandered too far off the path if we decide that we really are sick and tired of having our sensual desires take us over, and we want something better than that. That's how you motivate yourself.

So there are times when you use unskillful qualities to get rid of other unskillful qualities. Then, gradually, things will get more and more refined—especially as the path picks up momentum. The concentration itself becomes your motivation. The mindfulness becomes your motivation. Your insight becomes your motivation. All this is achieved by success through approximation.

So as Ajaan Lee points out in his talk on the various demons of defilement, some of them have their uses. You're a fighter as you meditate, and some of the most intelligent fighters are the ones who not only beat the enemy, but can also actually convert the enemy to their side.

You do have to be wary about these things. But as long as you're alert, you're heading in the right direction. After all, even good things have their dangers. Too much equanimity can be bad for your practice. The trick lies in learning how to deal effectively with whatever comes up. Knowing the danger and learning how to avoid the danger, you can learn to put a lot of things to use that would otherwise be denied to you. If you're sitting here trying to clone awakening, desire is denied to you. Craving, conceit—all those things are denied to you—and it means you're trying to follow the path without all the means needed for progress.

There's a kind of defilement that tells you, "Here you are trying to be peaceful, so why are you angry at your defilements?" That's defilement taking on the guise of Dhamma. You have to be very careful about that. So have your wits about you, look at things from all sides, and that's what will see you through.

To Keep You Going

June 16, 2012

The Buddha's teachings don't start with a first principle. They start with a last principle: the Buddha's own experience of total freedom from suffering. Everything else works back from that. On the one hand, he reflected on what he had to do in order to get there. But he also had to reflect on how to make his teachings persuasive to people where they were. How could he get other people to attain the same total freedom? And one of his strategies was to work with a desire that we have—maybe not all of us, but most of us—which is the desire for pleasure and happiness, something that sometimes gets dismissed simply as being hedonistic, lazy, and of not much spiritual value. But he discovered that if you could take that desire and really take it seriously, it could lead you far.

So, do you really want to be happy? What's involved in really being happy? For one, you'd like a happiness that's reliable, a happiness that doesn't turn on you.

What does that happiness require? One, it has to be founded on something that's not going to turn on you. And two, the search for that happiness can't harm others, because if your happiness depends on their being harmed, they're not going to stand for it. Third, you have to trust in your own ability to do this. In other words, you have to believe in action, that your actions are real, that they really do have results, and that they're not totally determined. You can change your ways of acting. Otherwise, if they were totally determined from the past, you'd have no choices. And that would make you give up right there.

So that's the beginning of wisdom. Compassion, of course, comes from the realization that your happiness can't depend on the suffering of others. And then finally there's the quality of purity, in which you really do make sure that your actions don't cause any suffering or any harm. You have to reflect on your actions and their results, again and again and again. Learning to recognize your mistakes and figuring out how not to repeat them. This requires a lot of work, but it does develop good qualities of mind: wisdom, compassion, purity. These are honorable things. This is a pursuit of happiness that isn't just hedonistic. As you follow it, you're developing noble qualities of mind.

And of course, another quality that you need to develop is patience, because if your idea of happiness is the quickest pleasure possible, you're never going to

get anywhere. You have to be able to work for long-term goals and develop the endurance that will see you through.

This point is emphasized in the Buddha's first summary of his teachings, after he had converted the followers of the Kassapa brothers, Sariputta, Moggallana, and all of their fellow students who came from another teacher. After they had become arahants, the Buddha gave a sermon called the Ovada Patimokkha. We don't have a record of the full sermon. All we have is a record of the verses that the Buddha used to summarize the main points, but the verses are enough to let us know that he started his sermon with the theme of patient endurance. The message is that to grow in the practice you have to learn how to be patient. You have to learn how to endure. You have to learn how to stick with things, because this is a path that's going to take time. You can't let yourself get diverted by every little pleasure that comes past. In fact, you can't let yourself get diverted by major pleasures coming past that are going to pull you off the path.

That requires a pragmatic kind of wisdom. How do you motivate yourself to stick with it? Especially when the results aren't coming immediately, how do you take pleasure in the fact that you're sticking with a path like this? There are various ways that the Buddha uses to motivate people.

Primary is the sense of craft. He often compares all the different skills needed on the path to the skills of archers and cooks, carpenters, musicians: people who learn to take pride in their craft and enjoy doing it well.

This means that we're concerned not only with the happiness that comes from having completed the work, but also with learning how to enjoy the work while you're doing it. So think of the meditation that you're doing right now as a kind of craft. That means developing a certain sort of resilience: not sitting and simply wishing, "May it work, may it work," whatever you're doing, but telling yourself, "I'm going to try this, to see if it does work. And if it doesn't work, I've learned, and I'll try another approach." Then be emotionally steady enough that you're prepared for things not to work—or to work sometimes and not at other times.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a meditator is to find something that works for a little while but then doesn't seem to work any more, and so you just throw it away as totally useless. Actually, what you found was something useful in certain circumstances, and you want to remember it in case those circumstances come up again.

There's a concept that comes with craftsmanship, which may sound strange to us, in our modern romantic attitudes towards craft. It's called the dignity of obedience. There are skills that you have to pick up from other people. You can't insist immediately, "I want to do things my way, or I want to explore things my

way." First you have to learn the basic skills needed to really do a good exploration, so that you also learn how to be a good judge of what's good craftsmanship and what's not. To do this, you have to be willing to follow the example of the expert craftsperson and imitate it as faithfully as possible. That's how you pick up these basic skills. That's the dignity of obedience.

In the old days of the medieval guilds, there was a certain pride in learning how to do things just as the master had done—not necessarily that you'd do it that way forever, simply that if you learn how to pick up those skills, then you're in a solid position to expand on them. But if you grope around without having developed those skills, how can you trust your own powers of judgment? At the same time, you're missing a good opportunity. So there's a certain dignity and pride that comes in listening to the Buddha's teachings and really giving them a fair chance: learning how to adapt your ways of thinking and acting and speaking so that they fit in with the standards of the Buddha, instead of insisting that you want to change the Dhamma to suit your own ways.

Now, there are ways that the Dhamma can be expanded. The great ajaans, for instance, don't just quote texts at you. They have their own idiosyncratic ways of explaining the Dhamma, but it comes from their having mastered the basic skills. That's what gives it authenticity.

So that's one of the ways you can motivate yourself: learning how to take pride in your craftsmanship.

The obverse of that, of course, is developing a sense of shame—a healthy sense of shame. When you think about doing things that you know are below the level of the craft, you should feel a sense of shame about it, that you'd be ashamed to do that. This doesn't mean you say, "I'm a horrible person, I'm a miserable slob," but simply that you're above that kind of behavior. That's actually a sign of genuine, well-based self-esteem.

One of the most destructive attitudes around nowadays is the idea that shame is bad for people, so we should try to make sure they don't feel any sense of shame. Like the drug counselor I met up in Vancouver: He was part of a service offering free counseling to the drug addicts among the many homeless people there. He was doing his best to get the addicts to come in and see him. And he found the only way he could do that was to try to make the addicts feel good about themselves. But after several years of this, he was telling me, "You know, this is not getting them off the drugs. In fact, it's encouraging them to stay with the addiction, thinking that being a drug addict was perfectly fine." Sometimes a sense of shame is needed to make you a better person.

Together with a sense of shame is a sense of compunction. When you see a course of action that you know is going to harm somebody—yourself or others—

you want to develop a twinge of conscience: "Wouldn't you really feel bad about doing that?" That's your moral sense speaking to you.

So shame and compunction are two other ways that you can motivate yourself and come to take joy in the fact that "I'm acting in a way that's not harming anybody. I'm acting in a way that's honorable." There's a pleasure in that. There's a satisfaction in that: that even if you haven't reached the end of the path, at least you're behaving in an honorable way. And this is a path that harms no one. It develops good qualities of mind, such as the sense of honor that goes with the craft and keeps shame from becoming debilitating.

The major motivator, though, is heedfulness, realizing that "If I don't work on my mind, if I don't develop these good qualities, there's going to be suffering down the line, big time." You can ask yourself: Do you really love yourself? Yes. Do you want to suffer? No. Make the voices that ask those questions and give the right answers the dominant factions of your mind, so that you don't kill your sense of shame. You don't kill your sense of compunction. You don't kill your sense of heedfulness. You take them seriously.

The sense of heedfulness is the opposite of apathy, which says, "I don't really care," which is the way that some people think that having no preferences is. "Well, it doesn't matter. I'm okay with whatever comes up." Heedfulness says, "No. If I've got it within my power, then this is the most important thing I have to accept: that I can make a difference." Are you going to abandon that ability? Are you going to pretend that you don't have it? If you do, what are you going to think when you suffer down the line? You'll look back on the choices you could have made but didn't make because you were too lazy or too whatever to stick with them. That thought will bring a lot of regret or denial, neither of which is anything you want to develop.

So these are some of the ways in which the Buddha has you motivate yourself to develop patience, so that you actually do find a sense of joy, a sense of well-being, even at the points where the path seems pretty hopeless, where *you* seem pretty hopeless. You're not getting the results you want, the defilements are yapping at your heels, whispering in your ears, saying, "Hey, come on. Give up." You want to have other voices in your mind that say, "No, look. You really do want to take pride in your craftsmanship even though you haven't finished the table. You know you're working on a good table." Instead of thinking how many more steps it's going to take before the table is done, take each step, one at a time, and do it as skillfully as you can. Take joy in the skill, realizing that this is how you can keep your own best interests in mind.

You're alert to the dangers out there. You're alert to the dangers in your own mind. We've all got dangerous minds. But you realize that you're on the path that takes you beyond them. Whether the results come quickly or slowly is not

the issue. The issue is whether you stay on the path and you nurture all the voices in the mind that give you the energy to stay on the path. This is how you're a true friend to yourself, in that you can ultimately taste the Buddha's last principle, which is what gives the Dhamma all of its worth.

When the Buddha talked about the essence of the heartwood of the teachings, it's the fact that release is true. And it's absolute. There's something of substantial and essential worth to it. Everything else the Buddha taught derives its worth from that fact. If you're going to reach that essence, though, you have to make yourself a worthwhile and substantial person. And you want to develop the wisdom not only to see that what the Buddha is talking about is a good thing, but also to know how to talk yourself into actually sticking with the good path that will take you there.

The Science of Meditation

June 14, 2012

When you meditate, whether you realize it or not, you're actually making some assumptions: that the mind can be trained, that your actions can actually make a difference, and that it's worthwhile to train the mind, because the mind is what determines what actions you're going to take. You're also assuming that there's a pattern to the way action plays itself out. Certain actions are going to be skillful. In other words, they lead to good results. Other actions are not. They're going to lead to suffering, to harm. If there were no pattern, the things you learn today wouldn't be applicable tomorrow. You'd never know. Meditation, trying to learn any skill, would be a waste of time, because the rules could change at a moment's notice. And if your actions didn't make a difference, why are you sitting here?

The simple fact that you're here meditating, trying to train the mind, means that, at least on one level, you accept these ideas as assumptions. It's like scientists. Sometimes people believe science doesn't make assumptions, that it doesn't accept anything that hasn't been proven. But that's not really the case. Scientists work with lots of assumptions. One, if you're going to run an experiment, you have to assume that some things cause other things, and that by changing A, you may change B. In other words, you assume that there are actual causal connections in the world. In fact, that's what you're looking for: to see precisely what those connections are. You also assume that the way you design and run the experiment will make the difference between whether it's a good experiment or a bad one. You're assuming that people—you and other scientists—are responsible for their actions and they can make choices as they design and run their experiments.

Some forms of scientific knowledge like to claim that everything in the universe is predetermined by past causes, but the activity of science itself assumes free will. If people couldn't make choices, there'd be no sense in criticizing someone whose experiment was poorly designed, or accepting the results of someone whose experiment was well-designed. It would all be very arbitrary. And both sides could simply say, "Well, I was predetermined to do it that way." That would let them off the hook.

You're also assuming that some patterns are universal.

I was reading recently about experiments indicating that some of the constants they use in order to calculate the size and the history of the universe seem to be different in one direction from what they are in another. That's kind of scary. Scientists like to think that the laws of physics are the same everywhere. That's one of their basic assumptions. But this experiment calls that into question.

So there are a lot of assumptions you make simply by the fact that you act. Try to be aware of these assumptions, because we're going to be exploring them in the meditation.

Meditation actually puts them to the test for a particular purpose, which is to put an end to suffering. You need to train the mind; you need to experiment. Now, experimenting doesn't mean simply following some rules. It means having a control, and changing other things, manipulating them, and seeing if your manipulation makes a difference as measured against the control. You could sit and watch a process for years and years and years, but if you didn't do anything to the process, you wouldn't really know what the causal patterns are. You might think you see some patterns, but you can't really check them unless you've manipulated the causes and seen if the manipulation makes any difference in the effects.

There's an old Thai joke about the farmer who went into a town for the first time in his life. He saw a flashing neon sign. It so happened that he saw the sign when the light was on. He walked up to it and tried to blow it out. He blew on it and sure enough the light happened to go out. So he assumed that he had blown it out. Of course, the way you check for that is to see if the sign comes back on again and then see if it goes out on its own without your blowing on it, or if it goes out every time you blow on it. You've got to check things again and again and again, trying different approaches.

This is particularly important as you try to get the mind to settle down. What's going to work? What's not going to work? Sometimes it's a fluke. You're sitting here and all of a sudden everything just comes together. But you've got to figure out why. Otherwise, it's not going to come together again, and you won't know what to do. It's not just a matter of accepting that, well, sometimes the mind comes together and sometimes it doesn't. The coming together, as the Buddha said, is something you want to develop. You work on it. You bring it into being.

That's what *bhavana,* the Pali word for meditation, means. You bring things into being; you develop them. You work on your concentration. You see what you can do to make those moments of concentration more frequent and longer-lasting. You've got to experiment. Otherwise you won't learn anything about the processes of the mind. You can see things arise and pass away, arise and pass

away, and that's it. But the important thing about arising and passing away is trying to notice what you did to make these things arise, particularly unskillful mental states. What did you do? And what did you do when they passed away? When there's suffering, stress: What did you do to increase the stress? What did you do when the stress stopped? Then, once you think you've noticed a connection, you've got to test it again, and again.

Ajaan Fuang wasn't interested in hearing about things happening in your meditation until they had happened at least two times. In other words, he wanted you to gain a certain amount of mastery over your meditation so that you could bring these states of mind into being at will. If they were just flukes, he wasn't interested.

So it's important to be clear on our assumptions as we meditate here. The idea that we're simply going to watch things, and that objective truth is going to appear when we're very non-interfering: You've got to call that idea into question, because the truth may be appearing, but how are you going to know what's connected with what? After all, causation is the basic issue of right view. Right view is not about inconstancy, stress, not-self. Those are the three characteristics or the three perceptions for developing dispassion. Right view has a larger framework: It's all about the four noble truths. You're looking for the stress, trying to comprehend it, until you can understand the cause. When you see the cause, you abandon it. The causal connection is what's important there. Similarly with the path: The path doesn't cause the end of suffering but it takes you there.

The image of the path is like a road going to a mountain. The road doesn't cause the mountain, and the fact that you follow the road doesn't cause the mountain, but by following the road you get there. There's a connection between the action and the point where it leads. We're assuming that there's a pattern here, otherwise what the Buddha taught 2,600 years ago wouldn't be relevant any more. Things could change at any time. But if there's going to be a path to the end of suffering that people can teach to one another, we have to assume that there's a pattern. Then, based on that assumption, we experiment.

This is what's scientific about meditation. We have some of the same assumptions that a scientist brings to an experiment: that you have free will, the ability to choose how you're going to design your experiment; and that you have to change things in order to learn about patterns. Otherwise, you can go through life thinking that neon signs are going to stay lit until you blow on them just because one neon sign happened to go out the one time you blew on it.

You have to try again and again and again to see what works and what doesn't, what's connected to what. That's where insight arises. And the skill in the meditation comes from learning how to anticipate when something is

happening that will be skillful or not. If it's not, what are you going to do to deflect it? If it is skillful, what are you going to do to make sure it really does give its results and that it keeps on giving its results? The only way you can anticipate these kinds of things is by going over them, again and again and again.

So we try to limit the number of variables here. You're sitting here with your eyes closed, focused on the breath. Well, the mind's going to do a lot of different things even while you're focused just on the breath. You have the choice to decide what to do. You can change the way you breathe; you can change the way you focus. Which aspect of the process are you going to focus on?

The Buddha talks about four frames of reference in establishing mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, mental qualities, all taken in and of themselves. It's not that they involve doing four different kinds of meditation exercises. You stay with the breath, which is an aspect of the body. Then if you're having trouble staying with the breath, you look at what other issues might be involved. Is there something wrong with the feeling that you're creating with the breath? Can you change that feeling? The Buddha recommends breathing in a way that gives rise to rapture or pleasure. Do you know how to do that? That's one aspect of staying with the breath, but it's connected with feelings, too.

Or you may look at the mind state that you're bringing to the meditation. Sometimes the mind is sluggish. Sometimes it's down, depressed, and you need to do something to give it more energy—to gladden it, as the Buddha says. Other times, the mind is bouncing all around like a ping pong ball. When that's the case, what can you do to get it to settle down? If it's burdened by a particular assumption, if it's burdened by a particular thought, what can you do to get it out from under the burden? That's using the mind as your frame of reference. You're still there with the breath, but you're looking at the problem from a different angle: the angle of how the breath is related to the mind.

Finally, there are dhammas, mental qualities. This frame of reference gives guidance for when you see that something keeps pulling you away: How can you deal with it effectively so that you don't keep on being distracted by it? What qualities do you need to let go? What qualities do you need to develop?

All of these four different frames of reference deal with different aspects of the problem of how you stay with the breath. The skill here is a matter of learning to read the situation to notice which aspect you have to focus on. This comes with practice and it comes with experimenting, tweaking things.

I think it was Kurt Vonnegut who compared scientists to little kids, people who still like to play even as they grow up. And most of the famous scientists were like that. They would play with ideas. They would play with possibilities. That's how they discovered things that other people hadn't discovered before, or

hadn't even thought of before. Science is not a body of knowledge. It's an approach, with assumptions. And meditation is the same. You could read all the teachings in the Canon, you could read all the teachings of the ajaans and be able to repeat them, but that wouldn't get you awakened. That's the wrong approach.

What *does* lead to awakening is taking the Buddha's approach, which was an experimental approach, based on the assumption that you can learn from changing your actions. That's actually two assumptions: One, you can change your actions. Two, there are patterns that can be learned in that way.

This is what makes meditation a science. The clearer you are about the fact that the *approach,* this experimental approach, is going to give you the knowledge, that's when the knowledge really will make a huge difference in your mind, in your life, in your entire relationship to space and time. It's that radical.

So be willing to call some of your other assumptions into question, especially those that get in the way of the quest for the end of suffering. And give this experiment a try.

Rebirth is Relevant

March 9, 2012

The sutta we chanted just now, the Dhamma-niyama Sutta, is usually chanted on occasions related to a death. It's interesting that the really serious suttas—like this one, and the passages from the Abhidhamma, dependent co-arising, the Fire Sermon, the Not-self Discourse—are chanted on occasions related to death. When you have a housewarming or other event that's supposed to be auspicious, there are a lot of chants about happiness and blessings. But then when death comes, you have to get serious. Of course, if you get serious only when a death happens, it's usually too late.

So it's good to be prepared, good to think about death, even if you think it's a long way away. The Buddha has you reflect every day that you're subject to aging, illness, and death. These things are normal—not just for you, but for everybody. On some days, you have more reason to reflect. We had two funeral chants this afternoon, one we had known was going to happen; another one that came up out of nowhere. On the way back from the trip outside, we went past an accident, and the car was badly mangled. I'd be surprised if the driver survived. So we dedicated a chant to him.

And what, they say that 250,000 people die every day? So there's plenty of occasion to think about death. Yet we tend to avoid it—because most people have no idea of how to prepare. Death, for them, is just one of those big mysteries and what can you do? You die. You just die. That's the way a lot of people think about it.

But the Buddha went out of his way to talk about death and rebirth, because there's a skill to dying well—a skill that can save you from a lot of suffering, both while you're dying and after.

Because death is not the end. Rebirth happens. Some people think that the Buddha picked up the teaching on rebirth from his culture and hadn't really thought it through. They wonder how it could be relevant to the four noble truths and the end of suffering, so they put it aside as something they can safely ignore. But it's actually extremely relevant. For one thing, rebirth wasn't universally accepted in the Buddha's time. It was a hot issue. Some people thought that there was rebirth; other people thought that there wasn't. And the way the question was approached centered on the issue of what a person *is,* such

that a person could or couldn't be reborn. If you identified a person with something that could be annihilated, then rebirth was impossible. And even among the people who believed in rebirth, some said that there was no connection at all between rebirth and your kamma: that rebirth had nothing to do with your actions, and instead just happened to follow a fate that was determined by something or somebody else.

But the Buddha's take was very different. For one thing, he never talked about *what* it was that took rebirth. For him, rebirth was an action, a process. It was something you did, so he focused on *how* we do it. Most of us do it very unskillfully, and as a result, we suffer, again and again. But he showed that if you focus not on what gets reborn—something for which you're not responsible—but on how it happens—something for which you are responsible—you can learn to handle the process in a way that can either alleviate a lot of the suffering or put an end to it altogether.

In this way, the issues of rebirth are very relevant to the four noble truths. As he said, birth, rebirth, is one of the prime instances of suffering. And because he taught the end of suffering, an important part of his teaching had to deal with how to put an end to rebirth.

Now, because rebirth is an action, it's something that at the very least you should learn to do skillfully. How do you develop the skill? Fortunately it's the same skill we're developing right now as we're meditating. Rebirth is done through craving and clinging. The Buddha's image is of a fire that spreads from one house to another. What's the bridge between the houses that allows the fire to spread? The wind. The fire doesn't have to cling to an intermediate house to spread from house to house. It can cling to the wind, which sustains it and allows it to go to the next house.

In the same way, consciousness doesn't need a body to survive. It can be sustained by clinging, and clinging is sustained by craving as it goes to the next life. Of course, craving doesn't appear in the mind only at the moment of death. Craving is appearing all the time. It's causing us to suffer to a greater or lesser extent all the time. So fortunately it's something we can deal with right here, right now, trying to direct our cravings and desires in a skillful direction. This is why the Buddha has us employ desire to get the mind to settle down. That's a skillful desire. The desire to abandon unskillful mind states is a skillful desire. The desire to find awakening is a skillful desire. The Buddha encourages these things because the desire for awakening is the only thing that's going to pull us out of unskillful desires and ultimately lead to genuine awakening, where desire actually ends.

Remember Ven. Ananda's image of the desire that takes you to a park. You hear that there's a park and you want to go see it. You walk there, based on that

desire. When you get to the park, the desire is gone, because you've arrived. You don't need the desire any more. It's the same way with the path to the end of suffering. Even though the path aims at putting an end to desire, it has to use desire to get to the goal. Desire, skillful desire, is part of right effort. Once you're there, the desire is no longer needed. You can put it aside.

So as we meditate, we learn how to deal with our desires, our cravings, and our clingings in a skillful way. In that way, we gain the experience that will enable us to deal with rebirth in a skillful manner: knowing which desires are skillful and which ones are not, and knowing how to let go of the unskillful ones no matter how attractive they may be.

Ajaan Suwat used to speak very frequently about how your likes are what cause suffering. Yet for most of us, that's how we define ourselves: by our likes. That's exactly how the Buddha says we define ourselves: by our attachments, our clingings, and our cravings. This happens not only psychologically right now, but also in the way we define the new identity we assume after death, at rebirth. So because this act of self-definition is an action—and that's how the Buddha primarily looked at it, as an action—you want to learn how to do it skillfully. You can learn how to master it as you go through the day. If any unskillful clingings and cravings come up, you've got to learn how to let them go—while you're healthy, while you're alert, while things are going well in the body.

Because it's not going to be easy when things start misbehaving in the body. The liver stops functioning, or maybe your heart stops functioning, or something else goes on strike. Every part of the body is capable of malfunctioning. There's going to be pain, there's going to be a huge sense of frustration when you can no longer tell the body to do the things you used to do. If your mind isn't under control, your cravings and clingings will just go wild. So you've got to learn how to gain some control over them.

This is another reason why the Buddha taught rebirth: as one of our motivations for practicing and for being really strict with ourselves as we practice. After all, some cravings and clingings in the mind appear at first glance to be no problem at all. They don't seem to be affecting anybody else. We're okay with them. But if you think about the fact that these cravings are creating not only your identity now, but also the world into which you're going to be reborn, you realize that they're dangerous. It's like tuning your radio: It'll connect with whatever's on that particular frequency: hard rock or Beethoven or the ravings of some lunatic. Are your cravings on the frequency of the kind of world you'd really want to create and inhabit long-term? Sensual passion is the worse offender, because all of the worlds of intense suffering and conflict are on the frequency of sensual passion. Are those worlds you'd want to inhabit long-term?

After all, our actions do have long-term consequences. This is another reason

why the Buddha taught the fact of rebirth, because you've got to take these possibilities into consideration when you choose to act.

Each time we act it's a gamble, a wager. We have choices as to what to do. Some of them are easy and pleasant, and others are more difficult. The question is, are the more difficult ones worth it? What are their long-term consequences? And how long is long-term? How far out does that go? For a lot of people, the attitude is, "As long as I can get to death, okay, that's it. That's all I care about. What happens after that will just take care of itself." Actually, death doesn't just take care of itself. We're designing what will happen after death right now. This is part of the calculation you have to take into consideration with every act: How do the calculations of what's worth it and what's not change when you factor in the possibility that the action will continue bearing fruit after you die? Admittedly, it's a wager. Until you've gained your first taste of awakening, there's going to be an uncertainty about whether rebirth really happens and really is shaped by your actions. But the Buddha, from his own experience of awakening, affirmed that it's a wise wager to take: to assume that both rebirth and the karmic role in shaping rebirth are genuine facts.

Because, as he noted, you can't see all the results of actions here in this lifetime. Some people say, "Everything I've seen in life is enough to convince me that kamma works." Well, No, it's not. There are plenty of people who do all kinds of horrible unskillful things, yet they're still alive. They thrive. The Buddha has a long list of people who thrive because they kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. They do it with the right people and they do it in the right way to please someone in power, so they actually get rewarded by society in one way or another. But as the Buddha commented, those are only the short-term consequences. You've got to take the long-term consequences into consideration as well.

You hear about people who take classes where they say, "Suppose you had only one year left to live, how would you live that final year?" It would be good to have a class that says, "Suppose you really did get reborn and were reborn in line with your actions? How would you live your life differently given that assumption?" That would be good practice, because as the Buddha said, all the awakened ones of the past and present confirm that, Yes, rebirth is a fact.

This has nothing to do with the culture of India or the culture of America or Europe or whatever the country. For those of us who aren't yet even partly awakened, it's a question mark. But you can't just say, "I don't know," and leave it at that, thinking that admitting your ignorance is enough to let you off the hook. It's like going to a financial advisor and asking, "Where should I invest my money? What's going to happen with the market?" If the financial advisor says, "I don't know; nobody knows," you go find another financial advisor. Of course,

nobody in the financial world really knows the future, but they have ways of interpreting how things are likely to go. You want to find someone who's got a good track record. Because whatever you do with your money, it's a wager. If you decide not to invest it, that's a wager, too: that you'll be better off burying it in the ground.

The same with your actions: You can't just say, "Well, I don't know whether there's rebirth or not so I'll just ignore the issue," because your every decision to act or not to act is a wager, and it has to take into its calculations an assumption of whether rebirth is a fact or not. Your potential for future pleasure or pain is not a matter of indifference. It may be to other people—the people who want to leave you with nothing more than a "don't know" attitude—but it shouldn't be to you.

When you reach stream entry, that's when you'll know for sure that the Buddha is right. There is a deathless and the activities that have kept you from reaching that deathless have been going on for a long time, not just this one lifetime.

These are some of the reasons why the Buddha saw that it was very relevant to the practice that we take rebirth into our calculations every time we act—and that we make it inform our motivation so that we practice sincerely and with real determination. Be very precise about what's going on in the mind, because every instance of thinking is an action. It's something the mind does, and tends to do very unskillfully, which is why it's tied up in suffering. If we follow the path, at the very least we can learn how to think skillfully, which makes it easier to know how to take rebirth skillfully. If we're really skillful, we won't have to take rebirth anymore.

So rebirth is not just some idea that was tacked willy-nilly onto the Dhamma because the Buddha wasn't thinking properly. There were so many hot philosophical and religious issues in India at the time, and as we know from other issues, the Buddha was very particular about which issues he would address and which ones he wouldn't. Many of the issues he didn't take a stand on at all. But rebirth was something he chose to take a stand on, in his own way. After all, he was teaching a path of action to reach the end of suffering. All of his teachings are guides to action: What do we do so that we don't have to suffer? Even some of his more abstract teachings, like not-self, are teachings about action. Selfing is something you do: You create a sense of self. In what ways is it skillful and in what ways is it not? When is it useful to have a sense of self? And when is it useful to put it away, put it aside?

So if you're teaching a doctrine of action, you have to address the question of how to calculate the results of action, and that means you have to take a stand on rebirth: Is it something to take into consideration when you choose to act, or is it

not? Is it a skill you have to work at developing beforehand or not? The Buddha says it is. The great ajaans say it is. So the question becomes: How can we train the mind so that we don't have to suffer from rebirth?—so at the very least we can handle the action of rebirth skillfully. Or even better, really skillfully, so that there's no more birth and no more suffering.

The Canon records the realizations that go through the mind of an arahant at the moment of release. The first thing that you realize, after realizing the fact of release, is the fact that this is the end of birth. There's no more birth. That's the very first thing. So it's very relevant to our practice to take this issue into consideration. As the Buddha said, the odds of coming back with a good rebirth are pretty slim. But if we really master the skills of meditation, we won't have to worry about those odds. We'll have reached the point where we don't have to wager.

Always keep that in mind.

Conspiracies in the Mind

September 11, 2012

The world is enthralled with conspiracy theories—political conspiracies, religious conspiracies. I've even read books commenting on the Buddha's teachings, saying that he couldn't possibly have meant what he said, this business about going beyond desire. Sometimes they point out the paradox: If you want to put an end to desire, there you are, you're caught with desire, which they think places you in a double bind. So maybe there was something else that the Buddha was trying to tell you. Maybe the Dhamma's a conspiracy. That's what they think.

There's a big irony here: The Buddha's teachings are the most straightforward, compassionate teachings in the world, and yet people still try to get around them.

The problem is, of course, that there *is* a conspiracy going on—in their own minds. They don't want to practice. If greed, aversion, and delusion can dress themselves up as wisdom, as Dhamma, they can fool you very easily. So you have to be very careful. As for conspiracy theories outside, there probably are some conspiracies going on. As someone once said, just the fact that you're paranoid doesn't mean that people aren't really conspiring against you. But even if there are conspiracies going on outside, what are you going to do about them? The real conspiracy is the way the mind fools itself into wanting things that are going to disappoint it in the end—and we play along. We've been disappointed many, many times in the past, but we keep going back to the same old thoughts of greed, same old thoughts of aversion, same old thoughts of delusion, as if somehow, if we rearranged the elements a little bit, they'd turn out a lot better this time. But it's really the same old stuff, just over and over again.

So instead of suspecting that the Buddha's conspiring against you—or the Pali Canon, or the people who composed the Canon or the Thai ajaans or whoever—try to see to what extent you're not being honest with yourself. That's where the real test for the teaching comes in. Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Fuang make the point again and again and again: that if you want to find the truth, you really have to be true to yourself. Your own honesty is your only guarantee. After all, we've encountered plenty of cases in the past where texts were highly regarded, even worshiped, and yet they turned out to be false—sometimes very false, sometimes very detrimental. So who knows who composed the Pali Canon or what their motivation was. The real question, though, is, how are you going to

test it? You test it in your own practice.

Fortunately, the qualities that the texts recommend that you develop in order to test the Dhamma are going to stand you in good stead no matter what. Wherever you go in life, you're going to need more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment, more integrity. So the fact that you're asked to develop these qualities is not a waste, even if it turned out that there never really was a Buddha, just a bunch of monks sitting around thinking things up for the fun of it. Someone once said, "Whether there really was a Buddha or not, whoever wrote the Canon was pretty inspired"—but still, their being inspired is no guarantee that their inspiration was true. Your guarantee, however, is your own truthfulness.

There's the image the Buddha gives of the elephant hunter who goes into the forest and sees footprints that resemble the footprints of a bull elephant. But the elephant hunter is a wise and experienced hunter who doesn't jump to conclusions. He knows that not every large footprint comes from a bull elephant. There are dwarf females with big feet. Of course, there's nothing wrong with female elephants, but dwarf females can't do the work that a bull elephant can do. You want a bull elephant. So even though the large footprints are no guarantee, they look likely, so you follow them. As you follow them, you see scratch marks high up in the trees on the bark, on the limbs. Again, the experienced elephant hunter doesn't come to the conclusion that those must be the marks of a bull elephant because, after all, there are tall, skinny females with tusks. The scratch marks may be theirs. It's only when you keep following the footprints and finally see a bull elephant in a clearing that you really know: "This is the bull elephant for sure."

It's the same with the practice. When you practice concentration to the point where the mind really does settle down in jhana, those levels of concentration are just footprints. Psychic powers are scratch marks. The only real guarantee is the experience of the deathless. And even with that, you have to be very, very honest and have a lot of integrity not to overestimate yourself.

You have to work on your integrity. That's what helps you see the tricks of your own defilements. It helps you see through any overestimation that may develop around your attainments. There's so much written about people who have low self-esteem as they meditate and every effort is made to give them high self-esteem. But the opposite is also true. Overly high self-esteem is a huge obstacle. And again, it's one of the conspiracies in your mind.

So whenever you find yourself thinking about outside conspiracies, remember: The big conspiracy is the way the mind fools itself. That's the conspiracy that you're really suffering from. The world outside is never going to be free of conspiracies or conspiracy theories. As we all know, this is the way

human beings act. They know that some things are rightly regarded as wrong, but that doesn't keep them from doing those things. They just try to do them in secret. That sort of human behavior is never going to stop. But you *can* stop your own inner conspiracies.

This is why it's useful to think about the defilements of the mind as something separate from you, because if you can't see them as separate, you'll never be able to gain insight into them. The image of the committee in the mind is very useful here. This inner committee is not a group of angels deciding to put on a charity event. They're the city council in a really corrupt city. There are a lot of shady dealings going on behind the scenes. So when ideas come up in the mind, you have to learn how to step back from them. Question them.

Think of the example of Ajaan Mun or Upasika Kee—people who didn't have a teacher to guide them in the meditation. In every case, they had to be very, very wary of what their minds were telling them. In Ajaan Mun's case, he was getting a lot of visions, and he had to learn how to treat them in a way that they wouldn't make him go astray. If he had a vision of a deva, he had to learn how to regard the vision as not really a deva coming to talk to him. He had to ask the question, "What if this is my mind playing tricks on me? How do I protect against that?" As he came to realize, the first step is that you try to determine, "What's the Dhamma lesson here?" Then you try to determine how you might actually test the message in practice. Only if it passed the test could you trust it—regardless of whether the vision really did come from a deva.

Then there's Upasika Kee's advice—that when a realization comes into the mind, be very careful to see what happens in the next mental moment after that. What does your mind say? How does it comment on this? What assumptions is it making? Can you learn how to catch them and drop them? This is how you learn how to see through some of those conspiracies. And that helps keep your practice on the right path.

Contentment

June 10, 2013

The principle of contentment with whatever you have is so important that the Buddha mentioned it three times when he described the four customs of the noble ones. Three of the customs are contentment with whatever food you have, contentment with whatever clothing you have, and contentment with whatever shelter you have.

It's important to keep this in mind. Ajaan Suwat said this was one of Ajaan Mun's favorite Dhamma topics—the customs of the noble ones—partly in response to people who kept accusing him of not following Thai and Laotian customs. Going out living in the forest and eating only one meal a day, not going to bless houses: These were not the sorts of things that monks were ordinarily doing in that time.

It's easy enough when we look at the customs of other cultures and see that they're strange. We have to remember that the customs of the noble ones go against our own culture as well. And contentment is one of the big things that really separates the customs of the noble ones from American and Western culture in general right now. Everyone is being trained *not* to be content, to want things just like this or just like that, faster, faster, faster: to keep the economy going, to keep—I don't know—to keep up appearances. So it's important to remember that the practice of the Dhamma really breaks with that idea. You learn to be content with what you've got. Try to keep things simple—because the simpler your surroundings, the easier it is to practice.

When you're not getting happiness from your surroundings, when things outside are not pleasing, they help to force the issue: There's no pleasure out there? Well, look inside for your happiness. This is where the fourth custom comes in: that you take delight in developing and delight in abandoning—i.e., developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. The delight reminds us that we're not being stoic just to be stoic. We want to *enjoy* looking for happiness inside, and to enjoy being independent from things outside.

This applies not only to things, but also to relationships. We're constantly looking for a good relationship with this or that person. We're moving our focus in the direction where it shouldn't be going; it should be coming back in, because relationships, like things, end. And just as with things, our culture has a

lot of pressure to go for relationships. We're not doing our duty as members of our culture if we're not looking for a relationship, and we don't look good in the eyes of other people. If we can enjoy not having to look good in their eyes or to meet with their approval, then we're that much closer to freedom.

If you're really serious about practicing the Dhamma, you've got to say, "Whatever you can do to simplify your life, you do that. Whatever you can do to simplify your surroundings, you do that." And when things outside are not happy, not quite what you want them to be, you turn around and look for your pleasure in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about the satisfaction that comes from seeing a defilement, even if it's just a little defilement falling off—like just a little piece of bark falling off a tree. You've got to learn how to take satisfaction in that kind of accomplishment. That's where we look for our pleasure.

Notice, the Buddha doesn't say, "Be content with what skillful qualities you have," or "Be content with what unskillful qualities you have." In fact, he said that he reached awakening precisely because he *didn't* let himself rest content with whatever skillful qualities he had developed—until he reached the point where there was nothing more to develop.

So he's not teaching radical acceptance. He's teaching us to learn how to focus our attention where it really matters, where it really will make a difference. When you think about relationships, think about the comment he made one time that it's hard to meet anyone who has never been your mother or your father or your brother or your sister or your son or your daughter. Our relationships have been shuffling around so much that we've lost track of how many cards there are and how many different hands we've played. He added that just that thought should be enough to make you want to go for release instead.

Ajaan Fuang made a similar comment: If there's a pleasure you really hanker after, it's a sign that you had it in a previous lifetime. And you miss it. That too, he said, should make you want to go for release, because you realize that if you get the pleasure again, you're going to lose it again. You're going to miss it again. You're going to hanker for it again—and it's never-ending. There is no satisfaction in things; there is no satisfaction in relationships. Even really good relationships end. And when they end, they can be devastating. That's why we turn and look inside; this is where we place all our efforts to change things.

Change your mind. Change your attitudes. Develop the skills inside that make it satisfying to change your mind, to change your attitudes. That's where we should focus our attention. That's the culture of the noble ones. Just as Ajaan Mun faced a lot of pressure to make his practice more like standard Thai or Laotian practice, we get a lot of pressure to make the Dhamma more American.

What it seems to come down to is simply that it'll sell better, but we're not here to sell the Dhamma. We're here to practice the Dhamma. Ajaan Suwat once said, "We're not here to get other people; we're here to get ourselves. And if other people see what we're doing, like what we're doing, and they want to join in, that's fine." But the primary point has to be that we're practicing. We're taking delight in developing skillful qualities and taking delight in abandoning unskillful ones.

That's where you want to learn to be a connoisseur, to have high standards as to what you will and won't accept. As for things outside, learn to be grateful for whatever you do get. Look around yourself here at the monastery. Everything here comes from someone's generosity. Nobody was forced to give anything. Nobody was giving anything out of a sense of obligation. They gave out of the goodness of their hearts. So we should learn to be grateful for everything that comes our way and learn how to express that gratitude by delighting in developing skillful qualities and delighting in abandoning unskillful ones.

Take this principle of contentment to heart. It's not just words; it's the way we live. And if it's not the way we're living, it's the way we *should* be living. As the Buddha once said, it's one of the principles that determines when a particular practice or a particular attitude in the mind is or is not in line with the Dhamma: Does it lead to contentment, or does it lead to discontent? The Buddha himself said that discontent with regard to skillful qualities is an important principle. In fact, it was one of the principles that led to his own awakening. But as for contentment with material things, that's something you've really got to develop, for only then will your practice be in line with the Dhamma.

So be clear as to where your contentment should be focused and where your discontent should be focused. If you see that you're still engaging in unskillful thoughts or you're still causing stress in one way or another to your own mind, that's an area where you should not be content. You want to figure out what you're doing wrong and how you can change the situation.

As for material things, we've got more than enough here. Every time you use anything, remember you're using someone else's generosity, so you want to use it frugally and well. Use it with a sense of appreciation for its purpose in training your mind, because that's why they gave it: so that it would be used in the practice of training the mind. Even when you're outside of the monastery—where basically, business as usual is business as usual, and not everything that comes your way is an act of generosity—be sensitive to when it is. Have a sense of appreciation. And constantly be on the lookout for ways in which you can be countercultural. In other words, you can embody the culture of the noble ones even as you're living in a very antagonistic culture—one that's trying to pull you away in all sorts of other directions, making you discontented with material

things, and contented with whatever's arising in your mind.

In some ways, this makes you an outsider, but outsiders are in a good position. They're not automatically sucked into all the craziness that you can find in every society. There's a strength that comes with being an outsider. If your situation has to be a particular way—it has to be like this, has to be like that—you're a hothouse creature. The temperature has to be just right; the humidity has to be just right. The fertilizer, the sunlight, everything has to be very carefully controlled or otherwise you'll die. That's not a strong plant. The strong plants are the ones that can live in any situation. As a practitioner, you want to try to make yourself strong in just that same way, willing and able to thrive in any situation. If you're responsible for having influence on the situation, do what you can to keep it simple so that you can maintain your focus.

Here at Wat Metta, we're part of the forest tradition, but physically we're widely separated from where most of the tradition is being practiced in Thailand. It's by trying to maintain the culture of the noble ones that we maintain a sense of closeness to the rest of the tradition. The same holds true when you leave the monastery. Try to maintain these attitudes of contentment—with food, clothing, shelter—and find your delight not in having nice food, clothing, or shelter, but in noticing when you can develop skillful qualities in the mind and when you can abandon unskillful ones. That's how you stay close.

The No Common Sense Zone

January 28, 2014

Those instructions that the Buddha gave to Rahula, at the very beginning of his time as a monk, are basically instructions on approaching the practice as a skill. You make up your mind that you're going to try to act skillfully. Then you figure out what to do, try to do it, watch for the results while you're doing it. If you find something's coming out not the way you wanted it, you stop. If things seem to be coming the way you want, you continue. And then when they're done, you look at what you've got.

When you're learning a physical skill—whether it's carpentry, flower arranging, or cooking—"what you've got" means the object you're working on. Take cooking, for example: You first make up your mind you're going to make a good ratatouille, then you taste it while you're doing it, and then you taste it again when it's done.

The same when you make a chest of drawers: While you're working on it, you have to pass judgment on your actions as to whether they're what you intended or not. Or if what you intended is not working out, you try something else. Then when the object is done, you examine it and see what you can learn from it. When the object is what you wanted it to be, you've reached your goal.

We're doing something similar with the breath, the difference being that even though the breath is our object, it's not our goal. Our goal is the mind. We want the mind to settle down. What kind of breathing will help? You try things out. You try chest breathing, you try abdominal breathing, you try breathing all the way down to your toes. Which feels good? Which do you find easiest to settle down on? How about longer or shorter breathing? Faster or slower? Think of the breath penetrating all the way deep into your brain. Think of it penetrating into your bones. What way of thinking about the breath is easiest to stay with?

As you do this, you learn a lot. In particular, you're learning how to learn. You're learning about cause and effect, both in the mind and the body. This is important because, when the Buddha gave his most succinct summary of what he awakened to, it was the principle of cause and effect. "When there is this, there is that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that."

Sounds pretty abstract. But he's boiling down a principle that he tested by

seeing which kinds of actions lead to good results and which kinds don't, and from there, seeing what kind of actions lead you outside of normal cause and effect, lead to the end of action.

That's the big skill right there, but to get to that big skill you have to work on the little ones. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Could it feel better? As you work with this, don't let yourself get discouraged. Use your powers of observation, use your ingenuity, on little things like this: the same way that you work with hammers and saws when you're building a hut, needle and thread when you're making flower arrangements, flour and butter when you're baking a cake. You learn more than just about the needle and the thread and the flour and the butter and the hammers and the saws. You learn a lot about the mind. You learn a lot about your body.

The Buddha starts with the principle of working with little things like the breath, trying to settle down with the breath. To do it with care means care with each breath, in the same way as when you're folding banana leaves for a floral offering: You fold each banana leaf, you pay total attention to the banana leaf you're working on right now. You find that by staying absorbed in the small immediate task, the larger task gets done.

Then, as you develop the basic skills, you can play with them. It's in the playing around that you learn even more about cause and effect in the mind and the body. This is how the bigger lessons come about.

This is *so* different from the normal way we in America approach spiritual practice. Years back, I was reading a book where the author made the point that, regardless of what the religion or denomination of religious thought in America, it all came down to Methodism: the belief that if your heart was good, that's all that mattered. You don't have to think much. You don't have to study or understand anything much. When your heart is good, you can just follow your instincts. Everything else will just follow in being good. People carry that into Buddhism. If you get in touch with your already-awakened mind, they say, then you don't have to think much. Just get in touch with your awakened mind and you'll know instinctively what to do.

But that doesn't help you learn anything, because what may instinctively feel right right now, is it really right? And, of course, you can't learn from any one moment as to what will be right for the next moment. So there's no learning going on, no heedfulness. If you tried that approach with carpentry or baking or flower arranging, you'd end up with a mess. Especially the idea that you can instinctively just get in touch with your awakened nature, then you don't have to think about what you're going to do or say or think, because it will all flow naturally: It's a No Common Sense Zone.

That was one of the things that was so bracing about meeting Ajaan Fuang, because everything was very commonsense, down to earth. But it wasn't small-minded: a very large mind and heart had developed as a result—large in the sense of being compassionate, wise, and skillful in what he did and said and thought. But it started from the little things, not overlooking the little things. Because it's through the quality of careful attention that you really learn.

So remember, we're working on a skill here. It requires common sense. It will take you ultimately to a place beyond common sense, but it's not below common sense. Below common sense is when you just say, "Well, I'll go with my feelings." And however you interpret the source of those feelings as to why they should be trusted: That leads nowhere.

But the path—and that's why the Buddha gave the image of the path to begin with—does lead someplace. The raft takes you across the river. The path takes you to a goal. And as we all know about walking along a path, if you're very careful about each step, you don't trip, you don't stumble. You're not thinking too much about the goal. You're paying attention to this step and this step and this step, secure in your knowledge that they're headed toward the goal.

If you pay a lot of attention right here, right now, it takes you far. So stay with each breath, each breath, each breath. Try to develop a sensitive touch, because it's in that sensitivity to little things that larger discernment arises. And it's through that sort of discernment that there comes release.

One Thing Only

November 3, 2013

There's a fake Buddha quote you may have heard. It quotes the Buddha as saying, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." The fake part is "the one thing and one thing only." He did say, "All I teach is suffering and the end of suffering." But people tend to focus on the "one thing only."

I've read some teachers interpret this, saying that there's a subtle teaching here: that suffering and the end of suffering are the same thing. From there, they go on to say, "What it means is that if you learn to accept the fact of suffering, then there's no more suffering," which is a pretty bleak teaching. It goes together with a One Method and One Method Only teaching, i.e., that the basic teaching is simply watching things arising and passing away, and that's all you have to do. Learn not to get involved, and everything will be okay. That's the highest happiness you can expect.

Again, the Buddha didn't teach that. Suffering is one thing; the end of suffering is something else. And they both come from actions—different actions —which makes all the difference in the world. If there's only one thing to do, such as just passively accepting whatever's going on, then you're let off the hook. There wouldn't be a need for very much discernment to go into the path because there wouldn't be many choices made. In fact, you'd be learning how *not* to make choices—trying to develop choiceless awareness.

But the fact is that you're making choices all the time, and what you're experiencing right now is the result of choices you've made in the past plus choices you're making right now. A major part of the path is learning how to accept that fact and then to work with it—to do something positive with it. In other words, if there's suffering right now, you've been making some bad choices in the past, and you're making some bad choices right now. If you weren't making bad choices right now, there wouldn't be any suffering. So wherever there's any stress, *dukkha* in any of its forms, you've got to look into what you're doing. But you can change what you're doing, and shape a different present: That's the positive point.

Now, because what you're experiencing right now is a combination of different factors, that means you have to look and look again. Those pleasures

and pains don't come marked with a country of origin, i.e., past kamma or present kamma. A large part of the meditation is learning how to sort that out: which things are coming from past intentions and which things are coming from present intentions. And what *are* your present intentions right now? This throws all the responsibility on you. The teacher's here to give advice, to see if you're going off course, and to help with a little course correction. But then again, you have to be responsible for deciding whether you want to take the advice or not.

This is the hard part of the path, and it's one of the reasons why people like to hear that there's a One-Size-Fits-All meditation method, and the method itself has just one technique. It takes the responsibility off their shoulders. But you're not going to gain discernment that way. You gain discernment from making choices and then learning how to read them. It's not the case that you'll go immediately to total understanding of what's the past kamma you're experiencing right now and what's the present kamma. You learn bit by bit.

Try to get the mind as still as possible. This is the basic pattern in all the tetrads of the breath meditation. You sensitize yourself to what you're doing, and then you try to do it in a way that leads to more calm, to more subtle forms of concentration and more subtle levels of pleasure. You work through this process of sensitizing and refinement step by step by step, which means that you have to be very observant. The Buddha gives you some guidance. If you notice that things are inconstant in the mind, especially if the level of stress or ease in the mind is inconstant, look at what you're doing. When the level of stress goes up, what did you do? When it goes down, what did you do? When things seem to be perfectly still and perfectly at ease, try to maintain that stillness as a baseline, to see if you can begin to sensitize yourself to more subtle ups and downs.

This keeps throwing the responsibility back on you. The Buddha's there with guidance. He gives you lots of different meditation methods to deal with specific problems as they come up. Breath meditation is your home base because that's the method that sensitizes you directly to bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication and points you in the direction of learning how to calm these things.

But sometimes issues come up in the mind that are a lot more blatant than that. That's when you need contemplation of the body, contemplation of death, contemplation of the principle of kamma, reflections on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. All of these things are there to help you with whatever the specific problem that's coming up, whether it's laziness or lack of self-confidence. There are ways of thinking that can get you around those problems, all with the purpose of getting you back to the breath—because it's when you're with the breath that you can see your subtle intentions most clearly.

Those intentions are the troublemakers. Those are the things you want to see more and more clearly, so you can figure out exactly where you're making

choices right now, and who, in the bureaucracy of your mind, is making the choice. Sometimes decisions get sent up to the top, and you realize that there's an issue you have to deal with. But there are a lot of lower-level management people who will make quick decisions and send things back down again without consulting you. If there weren't, your mind would be totally flooded with all kinds of trivial stuff. The problem is, though, that some of those middle-level decisions are not really trivial and not very wise. So you've got to get the mind more and more still to see where the subtle decisions are being made and if they're actually in your best interest.

So suffering is not the same thing as the end of suffering. The Buddha didn't teach just one thing; he didn't teach just one method. The mind, after all, is a complex thing, and you need a full repertoire of approaches to work with it. Which is why we need all this time to meditate: to get to know things, to stick with something for a while until you can see where you're doing it wrong. Then you can do a course correction.

So, accept the fact that there will be some right and some wrong in what you're doing all the time. You have to approach this with a certain amount of humility. Okay, yup, you are doing something wrong. But you've also got some rightness, and a lot of the practice is learning to figure out which is which, so that you can increase the rightness. It will be up to you to make the distinction, because when awakening comes, nobody else does it for you. That's a matter of your powers of observation, your discernment, and your sensitivity to the choices the mind is making. And this gets more subtle with practice, as you take on the responsibility.

You say, "Okay, there's suffering there, I know. I'm not going to blame anybody else." But blaming yourself doesn't mean that you're a bad person—simply that there's been a lack of skill and that's something that can be corrected. This will take time; it requires patience. Just as the Buddha said, to get to know someone well, you have to spend time with that person and be with them in lots of different situations to get a rounded view. The same principle applies to your mind. To get a rounded view of what's going on in your mind—where there's suffering and stress, and what's causing it—you have to spend time with it and be continually observant.

And remember that responsibility lies here. You *are* making choices. You've made some bad ones, but you've also made some good ones. And you want to be able to learn from both so that you can recognize the difference between the causes of suffering and the path to its end.

The First Noble Truth

November 5, 2015

The passage we chanted now starts with a very strange phrase: "those who don't discern suffering." You would think that everybody would discern suffering. But in this passage the Buddha's talking about understanding suffering on a deeper level.

When he explains the truth of suffering—he uses the word *dukkha,* which can cover everything from really heavy suffering down to very subtle burdens on the heart—he first lists different kinds of suffering: aging, illness, death, being separated from what we like, having to live with what we don't like, not getting what we want. Those are all forms of suffering we're familiar with. But in Ajaan Lee's words, they're just the *shadows* of suffering. They're not the real thing. The real thing is the clinging. That's the heart of the suffering.

We latch onto things like form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness as being *us* or *ours.* Or we latch onto the idea that they have to be this way or that way. And not only do we latch on. We feed on these things. That's actually one of the meanings of the word for clinging, *upadana:* feeding. We try to get our nourishment from them, which is why we find it so hard to let go. We're afraid that we couldn't survive without clinging to something. We're afraid we'll starve—that's why we keep coming back to suffering.

There are lots of different types of clinging. For instance, we like to cling to our sensual fantasies, which include everything from lust down to the idea of a good piece of chocolate cake tomorrow. We hold onto those sorts of things and go over and over them in our minds. And there's suffering there, if only on the level of a nagging stress. We might not recognize that there's suffering or even stress in what we're doing. We actually like what we're doing. But this is one of the strange things about suffering: A lot of the things we like to do bring suffering in their wake—and entail stress while we're doing them. Then we wonder why we feel so worn down at the end of the day; worn down as life goes along. It's because we keep running toward and gathering up the things that create suffering, and then we try to run away from the suffering that results. We're blind to what we're doing.

That's what the Buddha means when he says that you don't discern suffering. He's advising you to focus on this issue: to figure out what it is that weighs the

mind down, what puts a squeeze on the mind, and why. In fact, by centering his four noble truths on the issue of suffering, he's saying that this is the most important issue you've got to understand and resolve. And the first step lies in actually seeing what suffering is.

When you really *see* suffering, when you understand it for what it is, then the energy to practice has to come. You won't want to stay wallowing around in suffering or being trapped in suffering. You'll want to find a way out. The question came up today about how to put more energy into the practice. A lot of it's right here: reflecting on how much suffering you've been through and how much more there's going to be if you don't do something about it—and really letting that realization go to your heart.

Most people push it away. Years back, I was on a plane coming back from Texas with Ajaan Suwat. The man sitting next to us noticed that we were Buddhist monks and he had probably heard something about how Buddhists say that life is suffering. So he turned to us and even before saying, "Hi," he said, "My life doesn't have any suffering." Then he went on to describe his life. From my point of view, it was full of suffering. He had a son in prison; he had daughter who had gotten involved with a junkie, given birth to a cocaine baby that she couldn't raise, so the grandparents had to raise it. And on top of that the man lived in Blythe—which, if you know California geography, is about as bleak a place as can be, out in the hottest part of the desert. But he kept insisting that he wasn't suffering. Still, the more he insisted, the more you began to realize that he was suffering quite a lot. The only way he could live with it was to deny it, to push it away.

Well, you can push it away only for so long. Your mental arms and hands get tired after a while, and then it comes rushing in. The best course is to put the mind in shape so that it can actually look at the suffering or, in the Buddha's terms, comprehend suffering and stress. Only when you comprehend it can you do something about it. Otherwise, you deal with it blindly, and that simply creates more of what you're trying to run away from.

Part of comprehending suffering and stress means seeing *how much* of it there really is in life; another part is seeing precisely *what* it is. The Buddha didn't say that life is suffering. He said something much more useful and much more precise. He said that suffering is the four forms of clinging: the four ways the mind feeds on things. The clinging comes from craving—literally, thirst, or *tanha*—and the craving comes from ignorance. To counteract the ignorance, we have to bring more awareness to what we're doing, how we're feeding on things, so that we can see where in the feeding we're creating unnecessary suffering for ourselves. After all, as the Buddha points out, this is the suffering that weighs the mind down. Everyday events don't have to weigh the mind down. It's when we

grab onto them with our clinging: That's what turns them into the suffering that burdens us, that leaves us feeling ragged at the end of the day.

To look at suffering with the aim of comprehending it, you can't just plow right into it; you've got to have a good foundation to stand on—a sense of well-being in the mind, a part of the mind that can step back and not get swamped by the suffering. Now, stepping back doesn't mean running away from the suffering. It simply means having a separate place to stand and watch, slightly off to the side. Otherwise, you'll feel surrounded and threatened by the suffering and won't be able to look at it objectively. You won't be able to comprehend it because you'll be too busy trying to fix it or to push it away.

This is why we work on concentration to give rise to a solid basis of inner ease. From that basis we can look and see: "What am I doing that's causing stress? What am I doing that's causing suffering? Do I have to do it?" It's when you see it and realize that you don't have to do it: That's when you can let it go. In other words, you can simply stop engaging in those activities.

So you look at your life. See what part of life is weighing you down and ask yourself, "What am I doing to contribute to that weight? What am I trying to hold? What am I trying to cling to? How am I clinging?"

Of the four kinds of clinging, sensuality comes first. By "sensuality," the Buddha means the fascination we have for our planning sensual pleasures. We cling not so much to sensual objects or sensual pleasures as to our fascination with the way we can plan them and build narratives around them. We like to fantasize, "What would this pleasure be like? What would that pleasure be like? How about tweaking it this way? How about that?" The mind gets really fascinated with its stories. But in the Buddha's image, it's like a dog chewing on bones. You don't get any meat. You don't get anything at all, just the taste of your own saliva. The result is that the mind gets bent in a certain direction and starts looking for the pleasures it fantasizes about. It'll start doing all kinds of things, often very unskillful, to get those pleasures, and it ends up suffering.

That's one kind of clinging. Another kind is clinging to views about certain issues and identifying yourself around those views, or taking the view as an end in itself. You think, I've arrived because I understand things in this way. I'm right. Everybody else who doesn't agree with me is wrong." Now, there *is* such a thing as right view, but you don't hold onto it to make yourself right and other people wrong. You hold onto it because it's helpful in putting an end to suffering. It's true, it's right for that purpose, but if you grab onto it in the wrong way, for purposes other than following the path, then it immediately becomes a burden. The view may be right, but you're wrong. So you have to learn how to use right view about issues around suffering as a tool for the right purpose.

The same with the third type of clinging, clinging to habits and practices, which means doing certain things because you feel that by doing them, by obeying certain rules, you make yourself better than other people. Or the idea that somehow all you have to do is obey those rules and you'll come out clean, and nobody can criticize you. Well, a lot of people hold to the rules, but then develop pride around that fact. The unskillful attitudes they have toward other people who don't hold to those rules aren't clean at all. There's a lot of suffering there.

Notice that this doesn't mean we don't hold to the precepts. We do, but again, it's not to make ourselves better than other people. It's because we realize that if we don't hold to the precepts, we're going to create suffering for ourselves and for others.

Finally, there's clinging around ideas of who you are: that you have this kind of self or that kind of self; a separate self; an infinite, connected self—or maybe you don't have any self at all. There's a lot of clinging in each of these cases. Clinging to the idea of no self, in fact, can be especially strong. It's happened that when I explain to people that the Buddha never said that there was a self or there wasn't a self, someone gets upset and accuses me of depriving him of the solace he found in thinking he had no self. By having no self, he didn't have to be responsible for anything. So whether the idea is "I have a self" or "I have no self," the clinging and suffering can go very deep.

You'll notice with the clinging to views and clinging to habits and practices that a lot of the problem lies in this sense of I, I, I that develops around them; especially the "I'm better than somebody else because of my views or my practices."

As the Buddha says, instead of focusing on who you *are,* focus on what you're *doing.* It's not that you have to erase your sense of self. It's simply that you realize that you have to put the question of your singular "self" aside for the time being and realize that there are lots of selves in the mind. There's the self that's a parent, the self that's a child, the self that's someone at work, the self of someone at home, the self of someone out trying to have a good time. We have lots of different selves. What you've got to do is to notice that each of those selves is the result of certain activities. The Buddha calls these activities "I-making" and "my-making." Some of the activities are skillful; some are not. So you sort through your collection of selves by focusing on the activities that create them, and the activities they give rise to in turn. Foster the selves that will be helpful on the path and learn to look askance at the selves in the stable that create trouble.

This is where you have to develop an identity as a meditator. This is very helpful, the identity of a meditator. "I'm a meditator," is a good provisional self to have. For instance, you can start getting lazy in the mornings after you wake

up. Well, is this what a meditator does? No, meditators get up early in the morning. They meditate; they make time for the practice.

That kind of self is useful. It gets you up to meditate, because you need a certain amount of self in order to be a self-starter. We can't all stay at the monastery all the time. Even at the monastery, you've got to be a self-starter; even more so when you're out there in the land of wrong view. You've got to see: You do experience suffering and if you don't do anything about it now, when are you going to do something about it? As life goes on, it gets harder and harder to deal with these things. The issues of suffering don't go away. It's not that you have to work on this until age 65 and then you can retire. The problems get heavier and heavier as you get older. And for most people, their minds get weaker and weaker if they haven't had any training.

So you've got to discern suffering and foster a sense that "I don't want to suffer any more." That I is a useful one. Nourish that sense of self. Keep it going. In Ajaan Mun's terms, it's the I who doesn't want to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again.

In other words, you've been driven around by greed, aversion, and delusion for who knows how long, and there's a part of you that says, "Enough!" Nourish that part. Keep it strong. Make it a larger voice in your decisions as to when to meditate, when to read the Dhamma, when to turn off the TV, when to turn off the Internet—in other words, when to do the things that you know are actually good for you. Try to develop that sense of self as much as you can. There will come a point further down the path where you let it go, again, because you see that self as an activity that has served its purpose.

As the path picks up more and more momentum, you can focus more and more exactly on, "What action right now is creating suffering?" Because as the Buddha said, eventually you get to the point where you see that whatever's arising and passing away, it's just suffering arising and suffering passing away. You don't think in terms of who you are or who's feeling the suffering. It's just a matter of, "These are the activities that constitute suffering. These are the ones that *cause* the suffering and these are the activities that *are* suffering."

The question of *who's* suffering doesn't enter into it. The "who," the "self," whatever: just put it off to the side. When you see that the activities causing suffering are unnecessary, you drop them. And it so happens that you drop a lot of your sense of self in the process, because that particular self was part of those activities. But you don't have to attack your sense of self directly. Just notice that there's an I-activity in here that's causing trouble, so maybe you should drop the action that's creating it. See it as an activity rather than as a thing—and, eventually, that it's an activity you don't have to engage in. It's an identity you don't have to assume anymore: the "I" that feels wronged, the "I" that feels self-

righteous, the "I" that feels—whatever. The "I's" that lead you to do all kinds of unskillful things: Learn how to step away from them. And when the path has done its work, you can step away from the "I" doing the path as well.

It's in this way that you can gain a handle on this problem of suffering so that you really discern it, comprehend it, understand it, and understand a way to put an end to it. That's when you've really benefited from right views and right practices. That's when you can put them all aside.

So keep this point in mind. The reason we're not practicing as much as we should is because we don't really discern suffering. If you really discerned how much it was driving you, placing all kinds of unnecessary burdens on the heart, you'd want to do whatever you could to put an end to it, or at least to get your head above water so you can see clearly where you are and where you can go.

That's when you can be, in the Buddha's terms, "consummate in release of awareness and release of discernment." Freedom, that's what he's talking about. It's a freedom that doesn't need to feed, so you'll never have to worry about starving. That's how total that freedom is. As the Buddha and all the awakened masters have said, it's a real possibility—i.e., it's possible for you. Look at your mind every day to see how many times you say Yes to that possibility; how many times you say No. When you find yourself saying No, ask yourself, "Have you had enough suffering?" There will be times when you say, "Yeah." Okay, you can build on that.

The Second Noble Truth

November 13, 2015

When we meditate, we're creating an island for ourselves in the middle of a large, fast-flowing river. This island is our refuge. The Buddha says when you develop the establishings for mindfulness, you're making yourself your island. You're making the Dhamma your island. It's your way station to get across the river—your safe place, in the meantime, before you reach the other side.

This image applies both to mindfulness and to concentration. The Buddha doesn't make a clear distinction between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. In fact, the establishings of mindfulness are, in and of themselves, the themes of right concentration. You stay, for instance, with the body, in and of itself, as you're ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The mind gets more and more absorbed in the body, to the point where mindfulness, alertness, and ardency shade into jhana, or right concentration. The breath, for instance, gives you a sense of solidity so that you're not constantly flowing away.

Because that's the main warning in the image of the river. Its flow carries you away to danger: whirlpools, rapids, and underwater predators.

The river here, of course, stands for craving. It keeps going someplace else. The water's never staying still. It's always moving on, on, on, and pulling you along with it. If you try to find some safety in the things of daily life, remember the Buddha's image of being swept down by a river. You see grass and other plants on the bank of the river and you try to grasp onto them, but they tear away in your grasp. In other words, they get uprooted and pulled along with you. Many times, they'll cut your hand in the process. Some of the grasses the Buddha mentions in his analogy have sharp-edged blades that, if you try to hold onto them, will slice deep into your hand.

Of course, the grasses are nourished by the water of the river. The grasses here stand for the aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, mental fabrications, and consciousness at the senses. We try to grab onto these things, to pull ourselves to safety, to find some place to rest, because as the Buddha said, it's only when there's peace, when there's a sense of resting, that the mind has any real happiness. And yet, this is all that the river can grow: these grasses that pull away and cut into your hand.

I was reading recently a nature writer whose writings I usually like. She tends to bring not only poetic sensitivity but also a lot of science to her writing. But in one of her books she was reflecting on various ways of looking at the day at dawn, and one day she happened to notice two little dead birds. She thought about how little they had seen of life, and how sad it was in one sense. But then she started thinking about bird-dom as a whole, and she said it was like skin. The skin keeps creating new layers. The old layers slough off, but new layers keep coming. She ended up with saying that empathy is what makes it possible, and love makes it worthwhile.

I suppose you could try to tell that to the little birds to see if they felt it was worthwhile that they had to die as part of this sloughing off process, but I doubt that they'd go along. I mean, it's one thing to be skin cells and be sloughed off. But to be a living being and to be sloughed off so cavalierly by nature… The question is: Is it really worthwhile? And is empathy really what makes it happen?

As the Buddha said, craving is what makes it happen and it's inevitably going to cause suffering. In other words, it's not worth it. Nothing makes it worthwhile. If you see the skin as having some larger purpose, then you have to put up with whatever suffering is needed to attain that purpose. But as the Buddha said, the universe doesn't have a larger purpose. We don't have to keep coming back. We don't have to keep following the craving to try to grab onto something in hopes that it's going to be of some rest, some refuge, some respite for us, only to find that it keeps disappointing us in the end. We have the freedom to say that we want out, and to take the way out, because craving can't create anything but these clumps of grass that give us a little bit of a handhold, but not much. Inevitably, they're going to end, and there's always going to be suffering involved as they tear away.

This was another theme in that author's writings: that we have to put up with the suffering because otherwise we wouldn't be involved with life's great adventure. But as the Buddha said, suffering in a pointless universe is not really worth it. There's nothing noble about it. The bigger adventure is finding a way out: to understand the craving, to understand the cause of the craving, and to learn how to outgrow it so that we're not slaves to it, so that we're not being constantly swept along.

So it's good to think about how the Buddha defined the cause of suffering. He says it's the craving that leads to further becoming. Now "becoming" here means a sense of identity in a particular world of experience. Both the identity and the world are based on desire, a little kernel of a desire around which we create a sense of who we are and of the world that's relevant to that desire.

Say that you have a desire for chocolate. There's a world that's relevant to that desire for chocolate and there are worlds that aren't relevant. A lot of things

in the world outside at that moment are truly irrelevant to the desire, so they get blotted out of your chocolate world. Your sense of you as the person who's going to enjoy the chocolate, and the sense of you as the person who's going to be able to get the chocolate and eat it, and all the other aspects of you that are relevant to that: Those, too, go into that chocolate level of becoming.

Then either you gain the object of your desire or you don't. Sometimes when you gain the object, you move on to something else. Or, even when you don't gain it, you may decide, "Well, maybe there's even something better I can get, or something else that I'm more likely to obtain." Once you drop that chocolate level of becoming, you create another type of becoming. Or you may come up with conflicting desires that lead to conflicting states of becoming at the same time: You may want chocolate at the same time you want to outgrow your sensual craving, which creates a conflict. In every case, though, the becoming is always based on craving. It keeps pulling you in its direction. If the cravings conflict, they can pull you apart in many directions. This can happen on the level of sensuality, or sensual desires; or on the level of what they call form desire: the desire to stay in a form—like what we're doing right now. As we stay with the sensation of the breath, we're inhabiting the body from the inside: That's called form. Another level of becoming is on the formless level. Once you get the mind into deeper stages of concentration, based on a perception of infinite space or infinite consciousness, that's formless.

All three of these levels count as states of becoming and they're all based on craving. The literal translation for craving, *tanha,* is "thirst." The Buddha goes on to say that these states of becoming come from craving accompanied by delight and passion—*nandi-raga*—or, in Ajaan Suwat's terms, the things we like. These cause suffering. We go for them, in the Buddha's words, "delighting now here, now there." That "now here, now there": That's the aspect of craving that keeps moving on, moving on—creating little spots, little nuclei around which worlds develop through desires that we then inhabit.

As the Buddha said, there are three kinds of craving that lead to becoming. First, there's craving for sensuality. That's our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Notice, the problem is not so much the sensual objects, it's our fascination with thinking, "This is a sensual pleasure I like, and I'd like it like this and this—or maybe like that and that." And we can fantasize about these things and create all kinds of stories around them as we keep tweaking them in ever new ways. That fascination leads to suffering, because it's always accompanied by the hunger to get sensual pleasures. They don't just come your way on their own. You've got to go out and fight other people for them, because the nature of sensual pleasures is that they're based on objects or people or relationships that, when you gain, somebody else has to lose. Or they gain; you lose. So, there's a

constant struggle, constant conflict. And the mind gets weaker and weaker as it decides that it can't survive without having this pleasure or that pleasure. The more you depend on the environment to be just so, the weaker you become. This pulls the mind down.

The second craving is craving for becoming itself. We like to take on certain identities. There's the self-image we enjoy of being this particular person who's mastered these skills in gaining what he or she wants. This sort of thing can range from finite to infinite things. But that, too, is going to lead to the kind of grass that you try to grasp as craving sweeps you along and it's going to get pulled out of the bank or it's going to wound your hands, because these identities can't last.

Then, third, there's the craving for no becoming. That's the paradoxical one. You would think that the craving for no becoming would be something that would put an end to becoming, but actually to put an end to becoming directly, you have to take on an identity as the destroyer of becoming. That becomes your new identity, with a new becoming around it.

This would seem to leave you trapped, but, as the Buddha said, there's a way out. Instead of trying to put an end to things or trying to hold onto things, he said, you learn how to watch them as they come into being, and then you don't—to use Ajaan Lee's terms—weave them any further.

To do this, you have to put the mind into a state of concentration like we're doing now. This is your island in the river. It *is* a state of becoming, and you *are* inhabiting the body from within, and there *is* a desire to get the mind to settle down, but it's strategic. As you master this type of becoming, seeing the stages of what's involved in getting the mind to focus on one object and keep it there, you come to a greater and greater understanding of all the processes around becoming: how your sense of who you are as a meditator depends on the body and on the mind.

You work with the energies in the body. You work with the events in the mind. This helps you to see the process of becoming more and more clearly. As you learn how to pull out of the distractions that lead away from concentration, that, too, helps you understand the process of becoming. You get quicker and quicker at seeing the stages of how a little stirring comes right at the boundary between what's mental and what's physical, and then you slap a label on it. But now you can ask yourself, "What kind of craving was behind the label I placed on this?" You can catch the process more and more quickly.

So, even just trying to get the mind to settle down and dealing with distraction, you're learning something about becoming right there. Then when the mind is really settled in, you can use that settled mind to see more clearly how the process of becoming happens and how you can just let it go.

In other words, something comes up and you don't have to continue with it. Raw material comes in from your past kamma, but you don't make it into present kamma. You simply see potentials from the past as they have become, and that's it. You don't get involved in the further becoming. There's a sense of dispassion that comes when you see this. And because the delight and passion accompanying the craving are what keep the process of fabrication going, then when you no longer feel any hunger or thirst to do these things, they stop on their own. They stop without your having to go out and put a stop to them. They just stop. The causes stop, and so the results fall away.

So this is the Buddha's analysis of why we suffer. Some of the terms are fairly abstract, but when you gain a sense of this process of becoming and you can see the craving that keeps feeding it—and how it keeps sweeping you along, sweeping you along—then at the very least, you can say, "It's not worth it. Love doesn't make it worthwhile. Empathy doesn't make it worthwhile." That's when you're beginning to get your head above water.

As you come to meditate, you're beginning to develop an island. You haven't crossed over yet, but at least you've got a relatively safe place, something you can hold onto that's not going to pull out of your grasp or to cut into your hands. You've got a place where you can stop and breathe, to take stock of things, because this is an important part of meditation: It puts you in a position where you can step back from your cravings and regard them with less interest and less hunger, less of a compulsion to go along with them. You've got something else to hold onto that's firmer, safer.

So make use of this. Try to develop this island, because it's the only way to safety.

The Third Noble Truth

February 22, 2015

Of the four noble truths, the third—the cessation of suffering and stress—is the one we talk about the least, the reason being that it's the result of the practice. Focus on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

So most of our emphasis is on the path. But it's good to reflect on where the path is going, because it turns out that the third noble truth is not just nibbana. In fact, as Ajaan Mun used to point out very clearly, the third noble truth is one thing, nibbana is something else. The third noble truth has a duty associated with it, whereas nibbana carries no duties. The duty with regard to the third noble truth is to realize it clearly. Once it's fully realized, nibbana is attained and there's nothing more to do.

When you compare this third truth to the others, it's basically the act of carrying out the duty with regard to the second noble truth. The duty with regard to the second noble truth is to abandon it. You want to abandon sensual craving, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. And the third noble truth is just that: the act of really abandoning these forms of craving, once and for all, with the added duty of realizing the act of abandoning while you're doing it, and appreciating that it does lead to the ending of stress.

The wording of the truth mentions six different aspects of abandoning. It gives a list of six words, and at first glance they look very similar to one another—a list of synonyms from which you can pick and choose. The Buddha does have this tendency sometimes. He'll string out some adjectives or verbs that are all pretty close in meaning, to make sure if you don't get the first verb, you'll get the second or the third.

But in the case of these six aspects of abandoning, three of them are mentioned as separate steps in breath meditation, the very last three steps: training yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to dispassion, to breathe in and out sensitive to cessation, or to breathe in and out sensitive to relinquishing. Because they're separate steps, there's a practical difference among the three. This implies that there are subtle differences among the different aspects of abandoning, so you can take the list as a guide to understanding and practicing in a nuanced way.

The six steps of abandoning are: *viraga*, *nirodho*, *cago*, *patinissaggo*, *mutti*,

analayo.

Start with *viraga,* dispassion. The texts talk about two different ways to develop dispassion for craving. In some cases, you simply look at the craving, and your passion for it goes away. In others, you have to exert an effort for the passion to go.

But notice: The Buddha says that we're passionate for our craving. We may crave *things,* but we like our craving even more than we like things. We crave sensual pleasures, but we really feed off of the sensual craving. If we want to abandon it, we first have to learn how to not feed off it.

In a lot of the texts, *viraga,* or dispassion comes right after disenchantment: the sense that you're sick and tired of feeding off the issues the mind produces. To develop disenchantment, you try to practice in a way that helps you see that the things you've been feeding on really don't satisfy you that much. Their allure or attractions aren't worth the effort that goes into finding and preparing them. One of the ways the Buddha has you develop disenchantment is by focusing on the inconstancy of what you've been feeding on. But it's not enough just to say, "So, yeah, it arises and passes away and arises and passes away, or it arises because of causes and, well, what's next?" Instead of making a generalization, the Buddha wants you to actually *look* at things as they're coming and going, to see what actually causes you to go for them when they arise, and what you do that lets them go away.

This is why the emphasis on the third noble truth, or the duty with regard to the third noble truth, is to realize the abandoning of craving while it's happening. Ordinarily, we let go of our cravings throughout the day, but it's usually because we're interested in something else. We lose interest in one thing because we're suddenly fascinated by something else. So we let go of one craving to fasten onto another craving. We don't look carefully at the process. We just jump to the new craving, and we're off. But what's involved in letting go of the first craving?

Basically, what it comes down to is this: You find something more worth your interest, more worthwhile, more worth your effort—i.e., it *looks* like it's worth the effort that goes into it. Then suddenly you see the old craving is not quite that interesting, not quite that rewarding, so you let it go.

What are the actual stages in realizing this while it's happening? First, you see it come and you see it go. You want to do this really consciously. When you see coming and going, you want to see what's coming and going along with it. When you can see that when the craving comes there's going to be stress and suffering, you want to see that connection directly. Then, when the craving goes, the stress and suffering go, too. You want to see that connection directly as well.

Then you think about the rewards and the drawbacks, and compare the two. Are the rewards worth the effort?

Now, some things that come and go are factors of the path. You want to develop the path, so you stick with those factors for the time being in spite of the effort they require. But a lot of other things that we crave and that come and go are not worth the effort. Our biases tend to get in the way of our seeing this, though, so you have to do your best to see through those biases. Like the billboards on the way to Vegas: The casinos boast that their slot machines give a 97% payback rate—which means that they're upfront about the fact that if you give them a dollar, they'll give you 97 cents in return. And yet people still play the slot machines. Their biases get in the way.

And this doesn't apply just to gamblers. We make deals like this all the time in everyday life. In cases like that, you have to be honest with yourself to see that the amount of effort going into the craving and the amount of pleasure coming in return don't really match up. The rewards are really meager compared to all the suffering they entail, both immediately and in the long term. That's when you'll want to start looking for the escape, which is dispassion.

So dispassion is something that you try to develop by weighing things. See what's worth your effort and what's not, what's really rewarding and what's really painful, entailing drawbacks and disadvantages. Or very simply, see where the price is not worth the object you get or the pleasure you get out of the object. All of our sensual pleasures carry a price. We tend to turn a blind eye to the price, which is why the Buddha wants us to rub our noses in it, for us to look at it very carefully. What is the price of your lust? What's the price of your greed? What's the price of your irritation over things that you don't get or that, when you do get them, are not satisfying?

Weigh things carefully: That's how you develop disenchantment.

From disenchantment comes *viraga* or dispassion. You begin to see that craving is something you're manufacturing all the time. As long as there's passion for it, you keep producing it. It's like a factory running on passion. When the passion is gone, it doesn't run anymore. It shuts down. We tend to think of the object of craving as something already there that we feed on, but actually we have to fashion it first in order to feed off it. When there's no passion for it, it stops because we've stopped putting effort into fashioning it.

That's why the contemplation of dispassion, in the steps of breath meditation, is followed by contemplation of cessation: When you don't have passion for these things, you stop producing them, and they simply stop. Now, there may be a little bit of momentum that keeps running on, powered by some of your past passion, but your present passion is not giving any more power to

them. They run out, run out, run out. That's *nirodho,* cessation.

The next two steps are *cago* and *patinissaggo:* giving back, relinquishing. You realize that you've been holding onto things that weren't really yours to begin with. And so you give them back. Ultimately, this includes giving back the path as well.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image for this. He says you spit things out. You put something in your mouth and are ready to swallow it, but before you swallow it you say, "I don't want this," and you spit it out.

This is followed by *mutti:* You release it. This is one of the most interesting aspects of abandoning. You give freedom to the craving. You've been hanging onto it, you've been trying to milk it for what you want. It's like an animal you've caught and kept in captivity so that you can milk it, and you suddenly realize, "I don't need this milk anymore," so you let it go. You give it its freedom. And when you give it its freedom, that's when you're free, too. You're no longer burdened with looking after it.

A common image in the Canon is of a fire. A fire is trapped by its fuel, but *why* is it trapped by its fuel? Because it's holding on. It's clinging to the fuel. The fuel isn't trapping the fire. The fire is the one that's feeding, feeding, feeding off the fuel—and as a result of its feeding, it's trapped. So when you see that you're feeding and you don't want to feed anymore—you don't *need* to feed anymore—you let go. And both sides get their freedom.

The Thai ajaans talk about this quite a lot: The things you've been holding onto, things you've turned into defilement, are suddenly released and they're suddenly no longer touched by defilement in any way at all.

Ajaan Maha Boowa's analogy is of stolen goods. When the police catch a thief with stolen goods, the goods have to be kept by the court to become evidence in the trial. But once the case has been settled, and the authorities have figured out who the goods really belong to, they're free. They can go back to where they belong.

We're the ones that have deludedly gotten into these things and held onto them. They're not holding onto us. Ajaan Lee's image is of a plate of rice: If you don't eat the rice, the plate of rice doesn't cry. You're the one who cries from hunger.

Think about your own body. Most of us assume subconsciously that we have a pact with our body. We take care of it, it seems happy, and it'll take care of us. But the body knows nothing of this and wants nothing out of us. It would be perfectly content to die, to do whatever its material elements want to do—which they do by their nature whether they want to or not. But we're the ones who have entered in and placed all sorts of conditions on things, saying that they have to be

this way and that. We can make the body do those things to some extent, but after a while it's going to go only so far. Then we feel betrayed. And, yes, we have been betrayed, but not by our bodies. We've been betrayed by our own craving. So when you let that go, when you stop producing it, both sides get free.

And finally, *analayo,* which in the Thai sense of the term means that you don't have nostalgia. You've let your craving go and you don't miss it.

This nostalgia is the big problem. Usually when we let go of a craving, part of us still misses it and is ready to pick it up the next time around. In the normal equation, you've let go of that craving because you've found something better. Well, maybe that "something better" doesn't work out, so you go back to the old one. You still feel nostalgia. You're ready to pick up the relationship again.

If you find that you've let go of something because you thought you *should,* yet there's still some nostalgia for it, that's something you have to look into, because that nostalgia is the seed for the next bout of craving again. Only when you're totally free of the nostalgia for these things, when you've had enough, you never want to go back there, and you've let go to the point where there's a freedom that allows you *not* to go back: Only then are the dispassion and the rest of these things gone without remainder—*asesa,* as they say in the Pali. Up until then, there's always going to be something *sesa,* something left over: that little bit of nostalgia. So that's what you've got to watch out for.

Many times you can let go, let go, but as one of Ajaan Lee's lay students once said, you let go, but your hand is still on top of it, ready to grab it again. So if you see that you've got that tendency—that you've let go, you've spit out the craving, but something in the mind still wants to go back to feed again on what you've spit out—you've really got to look into that to figure out why. What is it that you still haven't fully understood about the drawbacks of that kind of craving?

These are some of the lessons that come from looking at that string of words, *viraga nirodho cago patinissaggo mutti analayo.* They give us a sense of what it means to really abandon things. Of the six, the aspect the Buddha keeps focusing on most, though, is the freeing. Once you free the craving, then you get freed as well. Freedom comes from letting go, giving back, without holding anything back.

So learn to appreciate that kind of freedom: Even in the little glimpses you get when you let go of a little craving, even if it's not total yet, begin to see, "Oh, there's a little bit of freedom there." Try to widen that freedom by being really hard on whatever nostalgia you might feel for the old craving, because that's how you get rid of those last traces.

Only then are you totally free.

The Fourth Noble Truth

November 19, 2015

As Ajaan Fuang once said, when you follow a path, even if it's one you've followed many times before, you always have to pay careful attention, because today there may be new things on the path that weren't there before. Some of them may be dangerous. Some of them can be good. If you're not paying careful attention, you won't see them. You trust the path. It's always been the same path. You've walked it many times before. There's never been a snake there before. There's never been anything else dangerous. But that doesn't mean there can't be a snake now. And if you're walking in the dark without a flashlight, you put yourself in danger.

So you want to look carefully at where you're going. At the same time, as Ajaan Lee once said, as you walk along the path, there may be little plants along the side of the path that you can eat. So you look carefully because paths can have both dangers and unexpected benefits.

These are good analogies to keep in mind as you follow the path of the breath.

You breathe in and out how many times in a lifetime? And as meditators, we've probably been watching the breath for who knows how many thousands of hours. But you never know when there's going to be something new: something good or bad in the breath, or something good or bad in the mind—because it's the mind together with the breath that makes the breath a path. The breath on its own is not a path. But the mind interacting with the breath: That's the path. And it's going to take us someplace.

When the Buddha sets out the four noble truths, pay attention to how he talks about the relationship between the first and the second, i.e., suffering and its cause. For the cause, he uses the word *samudaya,* which means something that arises together. It's what you look for when stress or suffering comes. You want to look at what arises together in the mind along with the suffering. There's a causal relationship between the two.

But in the pair of the third noble truth and the fourth, he doesn't call the fourth truth a *samudaya.* It's a *magga:* a path. In other words, the path doesn't *cause* the cessation of suffering to be, but it takes you there.

There are many images and explanations in the Canon that make this clear,

such as the image of the raft going across the river. The raft doesn't cause the other shore, but it helps you get there. You put the raft together and you hold on tight to it as you cross the river. When you've reached the other side, you let it go because you're not there for the sake of the raft. You're there for the sake of the other shore. But that doesn't mean that you don't do a good job of tying the raft together, or that you don't hold on tight to the raft while you're crossing over.

There's another passage where the Buddha says the noble eightfold path is the path of kamma that puts an end to kamma. It's composed of a series of actions, but it takes the mind to something that's not an action at all. So the path is not a cause of the deathless. But it takes you there. This is why the image of the path is so appropriate. The path to the top of a mountain doesn't cause the top of the mountain to be, but it gets you there.

So, as we're watching the breath—and the mind together with the breath—it's a path, which means it's not the goal of what we're practicing for. But to get to the goal properly, you have to pay careful attention to the path. Watch carefully what you're doing because there may be some unexpected things here. And you want to be alert enough to see them.

The texts describing how the Buddha finally got on the right path give two different versions of which of the factors he first discovered. In one version, it was right resolve. In the other, it was right concentration. But the two go together. Noble right resolve is directed thought and evaluation together with singleness of mind. These are the factors that get you into the first jhana. You're supposed to put aside thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. When you really stick with that, the mind will naturally fall into a state where it's pulling away from unskillful things.

And you've got the breath right here to settle in on. So you direct your directed thought and evaluation to the breath. In other words, your inner chatter focuses on the breath. You want to stay right here. Of course, this builds on all the other factors of the path, but it also brings them all to fruition.

Ajaan Lee has a nice explanation, saying that when the mind is in right concentration, really noble right concentration, you've got all the factors of the path together. For instance, right view: Your directed thought and evaluation are looking at where there's any unnecessary stress bearing down on the mind, and are trying to do away with whatever's causing it. Here in particular, what in the breath is uncomfortable? What can you do to straighten it out? And once you've got a sense of ease in the breath, how can you make the most of it so that it provides a good place for the mind to settle down? As the mind settles in, which mental factors get in the way of making the concentration more solid and less stressful? What can you do to drop them?

That connects directly with right resolve: You resolve on not going back to your sensual thoughts. You're going to stay right here, and to show more goodwill for the mind by making it even more concentrated. Right speech: Your internal chatter is directed to the breath and the way the mind relates to the breath. Right action: All your activities are dealing with the breath and the mind together—adjusting them this way, adjusting them that way, to see what works in giving rise to a sense of ease. Right livelihood: You use that sense of ease to provide for the well-being and maintenance of the mind. Right effort: You stick with it. If anything unskillful comes up, you just let it go and try to keep it from coming back. If anything skillful arises, you maintain it. You don't just let everything come and go. As for right mindfulness, the word "mindfulness" means keeping something in mind. In this case, you're keeping your breath in mind. You're also keeping in mind the need to protect your concentration on the breath.

It's in this way that everything converges into right concentration, so that right concentration gathers up all the other factors of the path and makes them whole.

It's good to think of the factors coming together this way, for otherwise, if you think of them as separate, you have too many different things to think about, like a mother chicken trying to gather up a bunch of baby chicks running around. Here we have only one thing to think about, which is: How is the mind relating to the breath? In the beginning, the main focus is on the breath. When you're trying to get the mind into jhana, you don't take jhana as your object. You take the breath as your object. If you approach the breath properly, the jhana will come without your having to think about it. You simply think about the breath and evaluate the breath until you get more and more absorbed in the breath. That's when the sense of pleasure and rapture can arise as a result. Then you make the most of them.

That's another one of the duties of evaluation: As you're evaluating the breath to give rise to a sense of ease, you also evaluate how to spread that ease around in the body so as to get the most use out of the ease. The Buddha compares this stage of concentration to kneading water into a ball of dough. When you're really good, you don't add too much water or too little. All the dough is moistened, and yet there's no water dripping out. What you're trying to do is to develop a sense of whole-body awareness, and it comes best when things feel really good throughout the body. There's also a sense of singleness of preoccupation, both in the sense that the breath is the one thing the mind is focused on, and in the sense that the breath fills your awareness here in the body so that the body is one mass of breath energy.

Then as you stick with this, the relationship of the mind to the breath gets

more solid to the point where you don't have to do any of the directed thought and evaluation anymore. You're just there with the breath. There's a sense of unity, of unification. The breath and the mind seem to merge into one.

You follow this through the next levels of jhana until you finally get to the fourth, where everything in the body is so well-connected—all the breath channels are so well-connected, the body is so nourished with the breath—that you don't even have to breathe in and out. It's not because you're suppressing the breath. It's simply because there's no need for it. The breath energy feels full in the body. The body's oxygen needs are apparently met by the exchange at the skin. Because your mind is so still, the brain is using a lot less oxygen, so you can be very still right here without feeling any need to breathe.

There are four jhanas, but when the Buddha talks about noble right concentration, he adds a fifth factor. He calls it "having your theme well in hand." In other words, you're able to step back a little bit from what you're doing. When you're thoroughly in a state of concentration, you're here planted with the breath. There's not much thinking around that sense of oneness, aside from simply the perception that holds you there. But for the fifth factor, the Buddha gives images of a person sitting, looking at someone lying down; or of a person standing up, looking at a person sitting. In other words, your focal point shifts slightly to the mind observing your mind as it's related to the breath. You're pulling out a little bit, using a smidgeon of directed thought and evaluation, asking questions that build on the lessons you've learned about how to deal with uncomfortable breathing—how to make it more comfortable and how to make use of that sense of comfort—and applying them directly to the mind.

Now, those questions actually fall under the terms of the four noble truths. Where's the stress? What's causing it? What can be done to put an end to it?

So you step back a little bit to watch the mind and apply the questions of the four noble truths to your concentration. It's at this point—where you're looking not only at the breath, but also at the mind in relationship to the breath—that right concentration becomes noble right concentration. You're here with one object, but you're examining it and seeing how the mind relates to objects. What does it mean to relate to an object? What kind of relationships do you have going on? What are the activities that keep these relationships going? Even when the mind is very, very still, there are still some subtle feelings and perceptions and thought constructs hovering around the object, maintaining that relationship.

It's when you see this that you can go on to the next stage, which is to gain some dispassion for even this state of concentration. Prior to that, you settle into the concentration and, as the Buddha says, you indulge in it. There's nothing else you have to do, nowhere else you have to go. You're right here. And you can use

that level of involvement in the concentration to help peel away a lot of really gross defilements, because as you leave concentration, and the mind picks up greed or aversion or delusion, you see how gross those things are. The mind inclines to not go for them because it's got a better point of view, a better perspective, coming from a better place to stay. When the defilements are clamoring for instant gratification, you see you've got this alternative form of pleasure, the pleasure of concentration, right here, to feed them. You've got this comfortable way of breathing. It's free. It's immediate. It's visceral. Just that fact can help peel away a lot of the appeal of things you were attached to before.

But ultimately, you use that ability to step back to take apart the concentration itself—when you see that even in these really nice states of stillness, there's still some fabrication going on. There's still some inconstancy in the feelings and perceptions. Things go up and down. The level of pleasure goes up and down. The level of stress goes up and down. It's very delicate and subtle, but it's there. When the mind can see that and gain some dispassion for it, that's when it opens up to another dimension, which is not right concentration or right view.

We're not here for the purpose of right view, or for any of the other factors of the path. We use them. They're all activities—even right view, which we tend to see as the mind's picture of things standing *apart* from its activities. We see it as the theory as opposed to the practice. That's what it seems to be, but as you actually observe your mind in action, you begin to realize that right view is not a theory apart from the practice. It's an action and so it's part of the practice. Everything we do when we're talking about the Dhamma is all part of the practice. And all the factors come together here where the mind can observe itself carefully in stillness and see what's worth holding onto and what's not, letting go of what's not—to the point where it doesn't have to hold onto anything. That's the kamma that puts an end to kamma.

So this is the path we're following right here as we're bringing the mind to the breath. It's a matter of being very observant of what you meet along the path. There may be some surprises. So even though the path is not what you're here for, don't keep glancing down toward the end of the path, saying, "Gee, when am I going to get there?" Say, "I'm right here. I've got to look very carefully right here where I'm placing my feet because who knows what's going to come up in the path tonight?" The path and the goal are two separate things, but their duties are not separate. It's in the act of observing yourself as you develop the path that you get to realize the end of suffering.

Always be alert as you walk along the path because it's the only way you get to see things you never saw before, or as the Buddha says, "to obtain the as-yet unobtained, to reach the as-yet unreached, to realize the as-yet unrealized." That's

what this truth is for.

Choosing Sides

November 8, 2013

When you read the factors of the path, one of the first things you notice is the word *right,* which implies that there is also a wrong view and a wrong resolve —all the way down to wrong concentration. And the Buddha doesn't leave it just implied. There are passages where he talks explicitly about wrong view and all the other wrong factors—which means you have to make a choice.

It's not the case that every path leads to the top of a mountain. I don't know of any place in the world where every path leads to tops of mountains. A lot of paths lead down into Death Valley. A lot of paths lead down to the ocean or into a swamp. There are lots of different places the paths can take you, so you have to choose: Is this the path you want to follow? And the choice really does make a difference.

We live in a culture where people like to have their choices inconsequential. In other words, it's simply a matter of personal taste. Do you want your enlightenment to be yellow, or would you prefer metallic grey? As if we were choosing a car. But even when you choose a car, there are consequences—and even more so with a path of practice. You've got to decide: What do you really want out of life?

Once you've decided what you want, you have to decide to make it come into being: That's another aspect of the path that's really important. It's something fabricated. You have to put it together; there's work you have to do. There are things that are not arising yet that you want to make arise; and there are things that are arising that you want to learn how to stop. That's what right mindfulness and right effort are all about. Again, this is something else that we in our culture don't like to think about or even hear.

Just today, I was reading an old translation of an Ajaan Chah Dhamma talk, trying to decide whether it deserved to be translated anew. Things were going along well for a couple of pages. Then all of a sudden, there was a passage where, in the original, Ajaan Chah talks about how important it is to understand the truth about *dukkha,* stress or suffering, and the cause of dukkha, so that you can learn how to stop the cause and, in that way, stop suffering. But the translation said you want to learn about dukkha because that, in and of itself, would stop the suffering. The activity of doing something to stop the cause was dropped entirely.

This is so typical of Western Dhamma. All you have to do is know things, accept things, and that's going to be the end of the problem—that's what they say. But the Buddha did teach right effort. And he taught right mindfulness as a guide to right effort. There are things you have to remember to work at putting an end to, and things you have to work at giving rise to. Once you've given rise to them, you have to develop them. This is all about making choices, taking sides. Which side do you want to be on, the side of right view or wrong view?

Many people say that the whole point of the practice is learning how *not* to take sides, not to cling to views that something is right or wrong. The Buddha does talk about not clinging to views, but that's a teaching to use after right view has done its work. When you don't need right view any more, you put it aside. But as long as you haven't gotten to the end of the path, you need to side with right view all the way down the line.

It comes back to that choice: What kind of happiness do you want? We'd like to have every kind of happiness, yet if we try to scoop them all up in our arms, some of them are going to get pushed out of our grasp. Some kinds of happiness actually push the other ones out. Sometimes we end up dropping them all. So there are choices that have to be made. If you go after some kinds of happiness, other kinds of happiness just can't happen. Not all forms of happiness are harmonious and conducive to one another. You have to think about that basic principle, as the Buddha said: When you see that a greater happiness comes from letting go of a lesser happiness, you've got to let go of the lesser happiness.

So while you're sitting here meditating, you're choosing. And you're making important choices. Do you want to stay with the breath? Or do you want to take this time to wander around in the world of your mind and pick flowers and gaze at the sky with no concern for where you're going? Or do you want to put it to work to develop good, strong powers of concentration and good, strong powers of mindfulness?

Mindfulness, you know, is not just watching things coming and going. As the Buddha said, when mindfulness becomes a governing principle in the mind, it sees things that are unskillful and it works toward getting rid of them. It sees things that are skillful and works toward giving rise to them. It actively gets involved in making things arise and making things pass away.

So you are taking sides as you practice. Hopefully, you're taking sides with the right side—right view and all the way down to right concentration—because it really does make a difference.

When the Buddha talks about different paths, it's not that this path leads to the top of the mountain from the north, and that other path leads to the top of the mountain from the south, all leading to the same top of the mountain. In his

description of paths, he says it's like seeing that some paths lead to a pit of burning embers while some of the other paths lead to a cesspool. There's a path that leads to a beautiful place and another that leads to a lake with a nice shore and lots of shade on the shore.

In other words, there are paths to good and bad places, and there are gradations of good and gradations of bad. So you have to ask yourself, which path do you want? A lot of us want to have… we want all the nice places. But if you go to one, you miss out on the other. You could, if you wanted to, try all the paths, but it would take a long time before you were done with them. The choice is yours.

So while we're here, we try to practice right concentration, right mindfulness. This is why restraint is such an important part of the practice: realizing that some things are going to get in the way of right mindfulness and right concentration, and you have to learn how to say No to them. The choice is yours. And remember that it is an important choice. It's not simply a matter of personal preference that will be inconsequential down the line. The choices you make really do make a difference. Try to side with the right choices, so when you look back on your path, you say, "Ah, this was the right path, and I'm glad I chose it."

Noble Standards

May 15, 2012

The truths the Buddha taught about suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the way to its cessation are called noble truths. And the question is, what's noble about them?

To begin with, they're motivated by the desire to put an end to suffering—which on the one hand may seem pretty common. Everybody tries to suffer less. Whatever people do, skillful or unskillful: If you asked them why they were doing it, they most likely would say that they're doing it to be happier, or so that there would be more pleasure and less suffering, less pain. So it's a common motivation all over the world.

What's really noble about the noble truths is that they take that common motivation and move it in a noble direction. To begin with, the Buddha's standards for happiness are higher. You should look carefully at what you're doing and the actual results you're getting from what you're doing, trying to figure out how to do it more skillfully, really skillfully, so that the happiness that results is solid and sure. At the same time, you're looking for a happiness that's blameless, that doesn't harm anybody else, doesn't harm you—something that gets you out of the feeding chain. That's what makes it noble: the fact that we're looking for a happiness that's blameless.

There's that story of King Pasenadi talking one-on-one with Queen Mallika in their private apartment. He asked her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And of course he's hoping that she's going to say, "Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself." And if this were in a Hollywood film, that's probably what she would say. But this is the Pali Canon, and Mallika's no fool. She says, "No, there's nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anybody you love more than you love yourself?" And the King has to admit obviously that No, there isn't. That's the end of that scene. It didn't go where the king thought it would.

So he leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "You know, Mallika's right. You could search the whole world and there'd be no one you would love more than yourself. But you also have to reflect that everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely as you do." And so the conclusion he draws is not that it's a dog-eat-dog world out there. The conclusion is that you

should never harm anybody.

This is the basis for compassion: the realization that if we're really looking for genuine happiness, our happiness can't impose suffering on others. The Buddha doesn't say why, but two reasons come to mind. One is that if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. They're going to do what they can to destroy it. And, two, there is that simple fact of sympathy. If you see someone else is suffering because of your happiness, it places a tinge of sorrow in your happiness. Now, some people are very good at denying that tinge. That's what a psychopathic personality is. People of that sort don't care. And there's a little bit of psychopath in many of us, in the sense that we just say it doesn't matter that so-and-so is suffering because we're looking for happiness.

What makes the path so noble is that we're learning how to outgrow any psychopathic tendencies we may have. You want to get really sensitive to areas in which you're causing yourself suffering and areas in which you're causing other people suffering.

Suffering here doesn't mean that you're hurting their feelings. Some people will use their hurt feelings to run your life, but that's not what the Buddha's talking about. He's talking about ways in which people would actually harm you: killing you, stealing from you, taking things that you need in order to find happiness—or even worse, getting *you* to engage in killing or stealing yourself.

What they're doing is their business. The question for you is, are you going to follow their example, or are you going to follow the Buddha's? Are you going to avoid doing that kind of harm to yourself and others? You've got to decide that you're in this for the real thing. And part of that means you've got to raise your standards.

The Buddha's approach is pragmatic. Sometimes you hear people complaining about pragmatism that it tends to be lazy. Many pragmatists will say, "If it's good enough for me, that's all I care about." That's it. So pragmatism gets a bad rap as a lazy, self-serving approach to life. The Buddha's pragmatism is different. He says you adopt these teachings because they work—that's the pragmatism—but his standards for "what works" are really demanding and high.

We've got to work on raising our standards to his level. This is often the hardest part of the practice. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha said that the practice starts with having admirable friends, people who have high standards. They want to help you raise your standards so that your idea of what's "good enough" gets stretched in the right direction. That way you begin to see areas in which you thought you were skillful and your actions were good enough, and you see that they're not really. The Buddha once said that one of the secrets to his

awakening was that he didn't let himself rest content with his skillful attainments. He always pursued the question: Is there a better way to do this? Are there higher standards of skill?

This is where criticism is helpful, when someone you trust points out the very areas in your life where you're still unskillful. There are even times when there's someone you don't really trust—you don't trust their motives while they're pointing this out—but they actually do point out something that's unskillful in your behavior. You've got to learn how to be a good sport, to admit the truth of their criticism and learn from it. You don't want to be demolished by the criticism. That doesn't help. But you've got to learn to look at yourself: "In what way is what that person says true? Do I still have this flaw in my behavior, in my thoughts, my words, my deeds? What can I do to overcome that flaw?" That determination is what keeps you on the path, and actually turns the path into a noble one.

I visited a Dhamma center recently where some of the students were complaining that their teachers were constantly pulling the Buddha down to their level. For instance, the teachers were talking about how the reports of the knowledges the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening don't really sound possible. Maybe it was just a case of lucid dreaming, and we know how reliable lucid dreaming can be. Now, when you pull the Buddha down to this level, that makes him easier to dismiss. His standards lose their force—they become "archetypes"—and that really puts an end to the path right there. It closes the mind to the idea that maybe there are things in the human mind that are more than we can have anticipated.

I remember, in encountering Ajaan Fuang, what was so radical about the experience was the sense that he did have some psychic knowledge that I had never thought possible before. It opened my mind: Maybe there's more out there than I thought possible. Maybe I can't take myself as the measure of all things. Maybe it would be good if I tried his standards. And I thought, "I'm going to have to stretch myself. Work harder and meditate longer."

When emergencies of various kinds came, I had to learn how to drop whatever I thought was important and focus on the emergency. Sometimes it was his health, sometimes it was another problem in the monastery: a fire on the hillside, a sudden building or repair project that needed to be done right away. And there was a willingness to say, "Okay, I can stretch myself here." That's what enabled me to grow.

I've told you many times about the time when Ajaan Fuang said we were going to sit and meditate all night. It was very early on in my time with him. We had worked hard all that day—at least I had been working hard all that day—and I didn't think I'd be able to handle it. And I told him as much. He looked at me

and said, “Well, is it going to kill you?” I said, “No.” He said, “Then you can do it.” And I did. Much against my will, but at least I gave it a try and found that it really worked. I didn’t die. And I benefited from the experience. I learned that I was capable of more than I thought.

So an important part of the practice is being willing to stretch yourself. That line from *Hamlet,* that there’s more in the universe than is dreamt of in your philosophy, really does apply to the Buddha’s teachings. There’s more to the Dhamma than any other philosophy can dream of. Human beings are capable of more than we ordinarily think. There are more dimensions to the mind than we would normally imagine.

And so this willingness to allow yourself to be stretched: That’s how you come, as the Buddha said, to realize what you’ve never realized before, to attain what you’ve never attained before. Because otherwise, if you keep on doing the same old things, you keep on attaining the same old things on the same old level that you’ve attained many, many times before. Nothing new ever happens; nothing new ever gets discovered.

On one hand this means being willing to listen to criticism; on the other, it means being willing to open your mind to the fact that there may be standards higher than the standards you already have. If you really want your path to be noble, you’ve got to stretch yourself to embody nobility. The result, of course, is that you benefit and the people around you benefit as well. This is a path whose fruits are not limited only to the person who tastes the noble fruits. It requires that you be generous, that you be virtuous, that you develop thoughts of goodwill and compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, where they’re appropriate. And that spreads the goodness around.

Stop Squirming

January 23, 2012

Most people who know anything about Buddhism know that the Buddha taught four noble truths. There's suffering, and its cause. The cause, of course, is craving, with ignorance behind the craving. Then there's the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation. What's less well-known is the fact that each of these truths has a task. In fact, that's why the Buddha divided them up into four different categories to begin with.

When you encounter something—whether it's stress or craving or something that's part of the path, like mindfulness or concentration—you have to know what to do with it. You don't just watch it come or go.

Stress and suffering are to be comprehended. The cause is to be abandoned. The path is to be developed so you can actually realize the cessation of suffering, so that you can experience the cessation directly. A large part of our practice lies in learning how to put these different tasks together—because they have to be done together.

For instance, comprehending stress and suffering: To comprehend the experience of stress and suffering, the pain, and the attachment and clinging that go with the pain, you have to watch them. You have to be able to sit with them. This requires a lot of endurance. Most of us don't like sitting with the pain. As soon as there's a pain, we move, run away. As a result, we only get little glimpses of it. Then we build up all kinds of monsters around it. It's like the monsters under your bed when you're a child. You hear a little noise under your bed and from that one little noise you can create all kinds of monsters with fangs and scary eyes. And because you don't dare look under the bed, the monsters keep growing.

It's the same with pain. It's something that drives us, and because we don't really look at it carefully or continually, it's like a task-master with a whip. It keeps us running, running, running. So we have to learn how to turn around and stare it down, look at it continually to see which part is the actual pain and which are the imaginary monsters with the imaginary whips.

This is why we develop the path: to give ourselves the strength to do that. In particular, the practice of concentration: You're mindful to stay with the breath and then you try to evaluate and work with the breath so that you can develop a

sense of well-being. This becomes your foundation, a place where you can rest, a place you can take as your haven. And because it gives you strength, it gives you your place to take a stance, where you don't feel so threatened by pain—either physical pain or mental pain. You've got another place to go when those things seem threatening. When emotions are raging, you can go to the breath. That pulls you out of all the arguments of all the different committee members in the mind.

When there's physical pain in one part of the body, you can focus on the breath energy in another part of the body. This is how we build our powers of endurance: by giving ourselves a place of well-being, even in the midst of a difficult situation. There's someplace we can hang on to.

Otherwise, we're not going to be able to comprehend suffering at all. When we can't comprehend it, we won't know exactly what's causing it. Actually, the Buddha divided suffering into two sorts. There's suffering in the four noble truths and also suffering or stress in the three characteristics. The stress of the three characteristics is something that's simply everywhere. It's part of the fact that everything is conditioned by causes, maintained in being only for a little while, only to change. That kind of tenuous existence is inherently stressful. But fortunately, that's not the stress or suffering that weighs the mind down. If it were, there wouldn't be anything you could do about it. What really weighs the mind down is the stress of the four noble truths: the stress that comes from craving and ignorance.

And that's a cause you can do something about. You can replace ignorance with knowledge. When there's knowledge of the right sort, then the craving goes away. You learn how not to indulge in craving or get involved with it. There's a passage where the Buddha compares suffering to two arrows. The first arrow you're shot with is the stress of the three characteristics. But then you shoot yourself with another arrow. That's the stress in the four noble truths. So think about that for a minute. The Buddha was a member of the noble warrior class, and part of the knowledge of being a noble warrior back in those days was how to behave if you were shot by an arrow. In fact, the women in the class were trained to be surgeons. They knew how to extract arrows from their husbands and brothers and fathers and sons. And one of the prime instructions when you're shot with an arrow is to be still. Try not to move.

The more still you are, the less damage is done. Then you try to relax around the arrow, so you can pull it out. If you tense up around it, you're just holding it in. So think of what it would mean to shoot yourself with another arrow. To begin with, there's the pain of the arrow itself, but then there's also the pain of the movement of shooting yourself. Many of us don't just shoot ourselves. We probe around inside ourselves with the arrow, making things worse.

So when you're learning how to concentrate the mind, the ability to get the mind really, really still is an important part of minimizing the mental pain around whatever physical or mental pain there may be. You learn how to relax around the pain.

This is why Ajaan Lee talked about finding a part of the body that's comfortable. He compares it to a house where some of the floorboards are good and some are rotting. You don't walk on the areas where the floorboards are rotting, you don't lie down on them, because if you do, you're going to fall through. You walk or lie down on the areas where the floorboards are sound. As he points out, if there were no place in the body at all where there was a sense of ease, you'd be dead. So there must be someplace.

If you have trouble finding it, think about the sense of space around the body. Focus there. And every movement of the mind that would pull you away from that, just let it go, let it go. Focus on the sense of well-being that you create as you breathe in in a way that feels good, breathe out in a way that feels good. And systematically go through the body. Think of relaxing it from the top down to the toes, and from the toes up to the top. Think of every pore in your skin opening up. All the little tiny muscles that hold the pores tight: Think of them opening up, opening up. Then let that sense of relaxation spread from the skin, in, in, into the body.

As for the areas where you *can't* get a sense of relaxation or there's a sense of pain, just go around them. Don't touch them. Don't get involved with them. Think of the relaxation as a liquid seeping through the body. There are areas where it won't be able to seep. There are little rocks here and there. Okay, just go around them. That's the way of water. And we know that the way of water eventually erodes the rocks away.

Then think of the breath being even more refined than that. It's like cosmic radiation: It can penetrate rocks. Think of the breath going right through. You don't have to push it through or exert any pressure. Just think of it already going right through the spaces between the atoms in the body and the spaces between the sensation-points in the pain. This helps to loosen up the tendency we have to tense up around the pain. It also gives us a sense of confidence. We have a source of strength in the body that's not affected by the pain, and that can actually make the pain a lot easier to deal with.

When you get really good at this, then you can actually look at the pain directly. That's how you start to comprehend it. And of course, in the meantime, you've been learning things about the way the mind habitually creates more pain. It shoots you, not with just a second arrow, but a third and a fourth and a fifth. Who knows how many arrows we shoot ourselves with in the course of a day?

If you see yourself tempted to shoot another arrow, you can look into that. Why are you tempted to do that? And then you can stop—because you know you've got a better way of dealing with the pain than shooting yourself again. This is how we develop endurance, which is one of the perfections.

When the Buddha gave his summary of the Dhamma to that meeting of 1,250 monks before sending them out to teach, the first thing he talked about was endurance, patience. That's because these are the qualities of mind that allow us to comprehend stress, to see what it really is, to the point where we actually see what we're doing that's causing it. For there to be the stress in the four noble truths, there has to be a movement of the mind. And unlike the stress in the three characteristics, that movement is not necessary. It's a habit we've developed in our ignorance.

So try to put the mind in a position where it can develop knowledge, the type of knowledge that watches things continually. We're not running away, not trying to push them away. Instead, we want to see: What is this experience of pain? What causes it to come? What causes it to go? What's the difference between pain in the body and pain in the mind? We tend to glom those together as well.

This is why discernment is such an important part of the practice. It's learning to see these distinctions. Which kind of pain or suffering is the first arrow? Which kind is the second arrow? How does it come? How does it go? Watching its coming and going, we're not here just to say, "Oh, it's coming and going, that's it. Everything is impermanent. Well, that's the end of that. Let's go on to the next one." That's not the point of what we're trying to do. You watch things come and go so that you can figure out when pain comes, when the pain increases, what did you just do? When the pain decreases, what did you just do? You want to be able to see the connections between these things. And you see them only when you're very, very, very still.

So try to develop, at the very beginning, a sense of at least a center in the body. It might be in the head, in the chest, anywhere where you feel that this is your safe haven. Learn how to maintain that sense of center, that sense of well-being in the center. Then think of that sense of well-being spreading from that spot. That way, you have your foundation, you have your standing position, where you can watch the pain and not feel threatened by it.

And this way you help not only yourself but other people, too. Look at the people in the world who can't handle pain—and at all the trouble they create for other people around them, people who want to help them. But there's only so much you can do for another person's pain. Even kings can't tell their followers to take their pain away from them.

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk is asking a king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king says, "Yes, I have a recurring illness, and people sometimes stand around while I'm suffering the pain of the illness and wondering if I'm going to survive." And the monk says, "Here you are king. Can you tell all of your followers, all of the people who work for you, to share the pain so that you can feel less of it?" The king replies, "No, I can't. I have to feel it all by myself."

There's only so much other people can do when they see you're in pain. And then they just stand around and feel miserable and helpless because they can't help you any further. But if you learn how to be with your pain and not feel threatened by it, seeing the distinction between your awareness and the actual sensation of the pain, seeing the way the mind uses perceptions to create a bridge from the pain into the mind itself, and learning how to cut that bridge, then you can be with pain and not suffer. And when you're not suffering, you're not throwing yourself on other people for help. You're less of a burden, not only to yourself, but also to the people around you.

This is why learning how to face pain is such an important skill. And why it's important to develop the powers of endurance and patience that enable you to watch, watch, watch what's going on. We're not here just to endure. As one of the forest ajaans said, if it were simply a matter of endurance, chickens would have been awakened long before we were, because they can sit for really long periods of time, much longer than we can.

We endure so that we can understand, so we can see things from a steady point of view. If your point of view is moving around all the time, then you're not going to be able to detect subtle things. It's only when your gaze is really, really still that you can see subtle things moving. It's like going out at night and sitting very still, watching the moon go behind a tree. You realize that you can watch the moon move. You can see it move, even though it's very slow and very subtle, it's moving all the time. But to see that, you have to be perfectly still.

The movements of the mind are even more subtle than the movement of the moon, so you have to get very, very still around your core where you feel at ease with a sense of nourishment, a sense of refreshment. Learn how to maintain that core and protect it, without closing up around it. Think of it as a little spot that's radiating well-being inside you, in all directions, and allow that sense of radiant well-being to fill whatever parts of the body that are open to its influence. That will give you the foundation you need for the endurance and steadiness of gaze that will enable you to comprehend suffering to the point where you can abandon its cause and realize its cessation.

That's what the practice is all about.

Between Either & Or

November 21, 2012

Ajaan Fuang said that when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun, he was very afraid of Ajaan Mun because Ajaan Mun was very hard to predict. One of the monks might get sick and ask Ajaan Mun for some medicine, and Ajaan Mun would give him a stern lecture about taking refuge in medicine. "Why aren't you taking refuge in your practice?" he would say. Another monk would get sick and he wouldn't ask for medicine, and Ajaan Mun would criticize him, "Hey, we've got the medicine. Why aren't you using it?" As Ajaan Fuang said, it sounded like you were going to get criticized no matter what you did.

But after staying with Ajaan Mun for a while, he began to realize that there was a pattern. If the medicine was there, you would use it. If it wasn't there, you made do with what you did have. In other words, you'd make do with your practice.

That's the kind of thing you learn by watching your teacher, and living with the teacher over time. As the Buddha said, there are a lot of things you're going to learn only by spending a lot of time with a teacher and being very observant, and in particular, getting a sense of "just right" in the practice.

The Buddha talks about the middle path, or the middle way, from the very beginning of his teachings. What's interesting, though, is that even though he presents this as one of the most important principles of his teachings, he doesn't explain it very much. In his first sermon, he says that the middle way is the way that avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torture. But there are very few passages in the Canon where he talks about what makes the middle way middle. There are other passages where he talks about how the teaching on dependent co-arising avoids certain extremes, but these are very subtle extremes: the extremes of existence or non-existence—in other words, the labels that we place in the mind, saying that things exist or don't exist. Or the labels that would say that the person acting is one thing, the person receiving the results is somebody else, or is the same person: That's another set of extremes avoided by dependent co-arising. Those are pretty subtle.

Even more subtle is the passage where the deva comes to ask the Buddha, "So, how did you cross over the stream?" And the Buddha said, "I crossed without moving forward, and without staying in place," and of course, that totally

befuddles the deva. It's a very subtle avoidance of the extremes of either doing something new or sticking with what you're doing, moving to a new place or staying where you are. It's an important principle, but, again, it's one that's not explained. It's one you have to learn through the practice.

Because all too often we're like—well, like the Buddha himself. He started out with a life of extreme sensual indulgence. When he realized that that wasn't going to lead to true happiness, what did he do? He went to the opposite extreme, self-torture. You see this a lot among former addicts who come to the Dhamma. They indulged in alcohol, they indulged in drugs, and now they're going to indulge in starving themselves, trying to deny all kinds of sensual pleasure. Well, neither extreme, as the Buddha pointed out, is going to work.

It's easiest to think in extremes because extremes can be expressed in short sound bites. The middle way requires being very observant, experimenting, and developing a sense of what's the just-right point in the practice. There's some confusion about this coming from the Thai language. The word for "just right" in Thai is *phor di*, which literally means "enough good." And many people will interpret that as "good enough," which means, "okay." You don't have to try to be really good, just good enough. But that's not what the ajaans are really saying when they say you should do things *phor di. Phor di* means you have to find the point that's just right—and sometimes "just right" requires a lot more than "good enough." Sometimes it lies outside of the box entirely.

Like the Buddha's approach to pleasure and pain: It's not that you try to find a middling point where each pleasure and pain gets neutralized. You pursue certain pleasures—the pleasures of jhana, the pleasures that come from mastering virtue and concentration, generosity—so that you can use them. Use the pleasure of concentration to put the mind in the proper mood and the proper frame of mind, making it stable enough so it can really see things in a balanced way. And often this requires a lot of concentration-pleasure to get the mind tamed, not just little middling doses.

At the same time, the Buddha has you use pain. Pain is a noble truth—when you use it as a noble truth. In other words, you use it to understand: What's the mind doing around the pain? Sometimes you'll gain this understanding with subtle pains, and sometimes it requires more extreme ones, when the mind is cornered and can't find any other way out aside from sharpening its discernment into what your perceptions are doing to build a bridge from the pain into the mind.

So instead of having you pursue pleasure and pain as goals in and of themselves, the Buddha has you use them as tools. That's an entirely different kind of approach. We're not looking for a middling path that's halfway between pleasure and pain. We're looking for a new way to approach both pleasures and

pains.

You have to keep this in mind all the time as you're practicing: Where is the "just right" point in what you're doing? Sometimes it's outside the box. If you're the sort of person who's been angry, you might say, "Well, I need to be really loving and compassionate," and you try being a Pollyanna for a while, and you realize that doesn't work. So you go thrashing back and forth, feeling that you're either too passive or too aggressive. It's not the passivity or the being aggressive that's the issue: It's what your intention is when you're dealing with people.

Look at the Buddha. In some cases he would totally avoid getting into arguments, and in other cases he'd pursue an argument and be really aggressive. So you have to realize: There was something else going on. The passivity or the aggressiveness was not the issue. It was his intention. His intention was kind. At the same time, he'd have a sense that some people would be just a waste of time. They were in the argument simply to win, to make points. They weren't trying to learn anything. Those were the people he'd avoid.

Like the brahman who came to see him one time and asked, "What kind of teaching do you teach?" The Buddha sensed that the brahman was looking for a fight, and so he responded, "I teach the sort of doctrine where people don't get into useless arguments." That was the end of that. But then there was the case of Saccaka, who came to make the Buddha sweat and shake, as he said. And he ended up being the one sweating and shaking because of the Buddha's aggressive response to his arguments. Saccaka was trying to say that everybody knows that form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness are your self. And the Buddha picked his argument apart, to the point where Saccaka really lost face, in front of all the people that he, Saccaka, had brought along to watch his victory.

So the issue is the intention. But then again, you can't take that as a sound-bite teaching either, because there are certain actions the Buddha said are inherently unskillful and you have avoid those. If intention were everything, you could say, "Well, I have compassionate intention in"—whatever: killing, stealing, having illicit sex, all the way down the line. But skillfulness doesn't work that way. In some areas there's a very clear right and wrong. Just like those "Bear Awareness" signs in Alaska. There're some areas with very clear dos-and-don'ts. For example, as the Buddha pointed out, killing is never skillful. Stealing is never skillful. Illicit sex is never skillful. Lying is never skillful.

Divisive speech, coarse speech, idle chatter: There are a few cases in those three where you can engage in them, but you have to know a sense of moderation. This doesn't mean that you do them a little bit. You engage in them only when you're confident that your intention is skillful, when you have to speak harshly with somebody to get that person's attention, when you have to warn people about someone who could take advantage of them, or when you

have to engage in friendly chatter to keep the group going smoothly. But those are areas where you have to be very, very careful.

In terms of the mind, the Buddha said, inordinate greed, ill will, wrong views are never right. So these are areas where there's a clear right and wrong. But then there are a lot of areas where "right" is at that point of "just right" in the middle. That's where you have to watch for your intention; you have to watch for the results that you're expecting and that you actually get.

Here is where it's good to have good examples, which is one of the reasons why we have the monastic Sangha. The Buddha didn't write meditation manuals and hand them out. He set up a monastic Sangha so that there would be people living together and learning the kinds of lessons that you learn from living with people who are further along in the path, seeing how they handle different situations: the lessons you pick up by osmosis, by using your powers of observation.

So there are no easy sound bites for finding the middle way. It's a body of knowledge that you pick up as you practice, as you live with other people who are practicing and are further along on the path. This way, you learn how to look at incidents and choices from a wide variety of perspectives. In the beginning, it's awkward because you find yourself choosing the wrong issues to focus on in particular situations at particular times. But over time, if you're really observant and willing to learn and willing to listen, you get a better and better sense of this point of "just right."

It's like people going to live in the wilds of Alaska. The people who survive are the ones who are not doctrinaire. They're the ones who figure out what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes some modern gear is very useful, and other times you want to stick with the old ways of doing things. And how do you know which is which? Through experimentation and also through learning from people who have been there before. Some areas have clear do's-and-don't's. Other areas are like that very last item on the "Bear Awareness" sign: where the bear has attacked you and is chewing on you. You have to decide, "Is this bear chewing on me out of curiosity or out of hunger?" If he's chewing out of curiosity, just lie there playing dead, and the bear will lose interest and go away. But if the bear is chewing out of hunger, you've got to fight for all you're worth. Now, how are you going to know the bear's intention? You have to be very sensitive, very alert, very mindful, right at a point where most people are losing their minds entirely.

This is one of the reasons why we practice: to put the mind in a position where it can learn these subtle lessons of where "just right" is even in difficult situations. Be willing to drop some of your doctrinaire ideas that everything has to be either this or that. The Buddha himself gave good lessons in this area when he was answering questions. People would ask him to come down on one side or

the other of a question, and in some cases he would. In others he'd say, "No, this is not a question that deserves a categorical answer." It might deserve an analytical answer. It might deserve to be put aside—if the question was framed in totally the wrong way.

So not everything is either/or. As it turns out, many of the most important issues are the ones where the answer is in between the either or the or, and you have to find exactly right where that is. As you practice, it gets more and more subtle, as I said, this distinction between the way the mind slaps the label of existence or non-existence on things, or the choices that it forces on itself to move or stay. Are you going to keep framing your choices in the same way, or are you going to think outside the frame? Sometimes the right answer is one of two alternatives, sometimes it's right between the two alternatives, sometimes it's off the continuum entirely.

So to develop that kind of sensitivity, you need to look for the point of "just right" in everything you do. It's only in this way that your sense of "just right" gets more and more on-target in taking you nearer to the goal.

Unsentimental Goodwill

May 8, 2012

Years back, when I was a lay person in Thailand, I was visiting a family in Central Thailand, and they took me to a monastery where there was an old monk who made protective talismans, little clay birds that were called protecting birds. You'd get one and you'd put it up under the eaves or someplace else high up in the house to protect everybody in the house, to keep the house peaceful. The monk was very old and quite sick, but he sat up to receive us and was very kindly. As we left, I happened to notice scrawled in chalk on one of the walls, in English, the words: "Don't love." I was very surprised.

The first reason for my surprise, I guess, was because I came from a country where love was considered to be the highest religious emotion. The second reason was because I'd heard so much about the Buddha's teachings on loving kindness. But as I got to know his teachings better, I realized that the word *metta* is not loving-kindness. It's goodwill. The word for love, *pema,* is something else again.

The Buddha didn't have much positive to say about *pema,* or love. There was a time when a group of Brahmans who had suddenly gotten faith in the Buddha came early one morning, getting ready to prepare food for the Buddha and the monks as they came out for their alms round. The Brahmans were making a huge racket, and the Buddha asked the monk, Nagita, who was attending him at the time, "Nagita, what's making all that racket out there like a bunch of fish mongers?" And Nagita said, "Oh those are Brahmans who have new faith in the Buddha." And the Buddha said, "I want nothing to do with them."

I've forgotten Nagita's precise words, but he said something to the effect of, "Please be kind. Their faith is new."

And the Buddha said again, "I want nothing to do with them." He added, "What do you get out of food? You get excrement. What do you get out of love? The mind gets altered and you suffer pain, sorrow, grief, and despair."

There's another passage where the Buddha talked about how closely intertwined love and hate are. If you love someone, then you're also going to love the people who are good to that person, regardless of whether they're good people or not. Or if they're bad to the person you love, you're going to hate them regardless of whether they're right or not. If people are good to someone you

hate, you're going to hate them. And if they're bad to someone you hate, you're going to love them, regardless of whether they're right or wrong. So your love is an unreliable guide to how you should skillfully judge people or relate to people.

So when the Buddha's talking about universal metta, he's not talking about universal love. He's talking about universal goodwill, a universal desire for happiness, but he never promotes the idea that everybody's good and therefore we should love them.

There are actually some passages where the Buddha talks about goodwill as protection, both from yourself and from others. In other words, if you realize you've been behaving in an unskillful way, you want to develop goodwill for yourself and for other beings so that you can strengthen your determination not to repeat that unskillful behavior.

This is because you realize that your motivation influences your actions, and so you've really got to work on your motivations. Whether it comes easily or not, you want to remind yourself that you don't want to harm anybody—partly because of the simple principle of kamma, that if you harm others, they're going to harm you.

Or as the Buddha pointed out in that story about King Pasenadi and his Queen Mallika: You will never find anyone in the world whom you love more than yourself. But you have to reflect also that everybody else has that same fierce love for themselves, too. So you should never harm them.

He doesn't say why he draws this connection, but you can think of at least two reasons. One is that if you love yourself that intently, it's not fair to harm others who love themselves intently. Why should your self-love be important and theirs unimportant? And second, it's not wise. If your happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to stand for it. They'll do what they can to bring it to an end.

So it's not because people are lovable that you spread thoughts of goodwill to them. You spread goodwill because you need protection.

And you want to be able to draw on that attitude of goodwill with regard to anybody, at anytime. The Buddha talks about the case where bandits have pinned you down and are savagely sawing off your limbs with a two-handled saw. He says, "Start with thoughts of goodwill for the bandits. And then from the bandits, spread that goodwill out to everybody else in the whole cosmos." Now, of course, at that moment, the people in the world who are going to be hardest to feel goodwill for are the bandits. But they're the ones you have to start with. So you've got to prepare yourself.

It's easiest to start with someone you find it easy to feel goodwill for, someone for whom you can in all honesty say, "May this person be happy." In

some cases that person may be yourself. In other cases, it may be somebody else. You may at first have some trouble wishing for your own happiness, so find somebody for whom you do find it easy to think, "May he or she be happy."

The phrases you use don't have to be elaborate. And you don't just repeat the phrase mindlessly. Just pose that idea in the mind until you agree with it.

Then start spreading that same thought to another person and then another, and include yourself in there at some point. If you have trouble feeling goodwill for yourself, ask yourself why. You might respond, "Well, I'm not a good person," or whatever, but that doesn't matter. It's not because people are good that you spread goodwill to them. It's because you don't want to harm them. And this desire should apply to yourself as well.

From there you keep spreading that thought of goodwill out, out, out, spreading it out, until you've got a sense of at least a certain group of people for whom you feel goodwill. Then ask yourself, "Is there anybody out there that you really do have trouble feeling goodwill for?" And some faces will probably pop into your mind. Then ask yourself, "What would you gain from this person's suffering?" And part of you may say, "Well, they deserve to suffer." The Buddha never says anything about people deserving to suffer or not deserving to suffer. He simply speaks in terms of actions that lead to suffering and actions that lead to happiness. Everybody's mix of actions is very complex. And just because someone has done something negative doesn't mean that they really have to suffer. After all, the Buddha's teachings are all about putting an end to *all* suffering, "deserved" or not.

Take that image of the lump of salt in the river. If you've done unskillful things in the past but you've developed an unlimited attitude of goodwill, that unlimited attitude will mitigate the impact of your past bad actions. This applies to other people as well: If they can develop an attitude of universal goodwill and try to change their ways, wouldn't that be a much better thing for the world than to see them punished, to see them squirm one way or another? After all, when people are punished in that way, they often don't learn the lesson and instead actually get more hardened and entrenched in their own sense of their rightness, and of the unfairness of the punishment.

So the world would be a much better place if everyone could develop an attitude of goodwill. And that's part of what we wish for: Not only do we want them to be happy, but we also want them to understand the causes of true happiness and to act on them. We want them to develop universal goodwill, too. That's something you can genuinely wish for anyone.

So it's for protection that we try to develop this attitude: protection for ourselves, protection for the people around us, protection for the world as a

whole. You don't have to think about whether beings are lovable or not lovable. It's just that when you think about all the suffering there is in the world, you should say, "Isn't there already enough? Do you have to wish more suffering on yourself, or more suffering on other people? Wouldn't it be better if we could all learn how to be skillful?"

This, of course, doesn't mean that everybody will be skillful or that everybody will find true happiness. It also doesn't mean that you don't protect yourself from other people's unskillfulness. All too often we confuse the idea of metta with a kind of Pollyanna-ish attitude toward life that everybody deep down inside is a good person and if we would only allow them to show their goodness, they would be very happy to show that goodness. Well, that's not always the case. There are a lot of people who, when you're good to them, will see that as a sign of weakness. So you have to protect yourself. But the trick is learning how to protect yourself in a way that's not harming anyone.

The breath is helpful here when you've developed a sense of your own energy field being filled with good breath energy. That makes it harder for people's unskillful energy to invade your field. The image the Buddha gives is of a solid wooden door and someone throwing a ball of string at it. The ball just bounces right off, because of the solidity of the door. You want to make your sense of comfortable full breath that solid—as opposed to the times when your body is not immersed with mindfulness and your mindfulness isn't immersed in the body. When that's the case, the Buddha compares your mind to a lump of clay. If someone throws a stone into it, the stone is going to make big dent in the clay, because the clay is so soft and weak.

Try to develop an attitude of healthy breath filling the body and a healthy attitude filling your mind. That's your strength. That's your protection. As for whether other people are going to be good or not, you can't let your goodwill depend on that.

So you want to take an unsentimental attitude towards goodwill. And that actually makes the goodwill a lot easier to maintain. If you go around trying to love everybody and then you run into somebody who's just really evil and really cruel, then you're likely to pull back into your shell. What you want instead is an ability to go through the world with your goodwill as your protection, with your breath as your protection—knowing that you're going to need protection, but that these things provide you with a protection you can trust.

There are a lot of people out there you can't trust. That was a lesson that really struck me when I first met Ajaan Fuang. One of his favorite statements was, "If you trust the path and you trust people, you're going to end up sorry for it." He explained this as follows: Suppose you've followed a path many, many times and you come to feel, "Oh, I don't have to carry my flashlight tonight. I know

this path is safe." Well, that might be the night a snake is on the path.

And the same with people. People may have been good to you, but it's not the case that they always will be. The human mind is very changeable, and they could change without notice. You can't rely on their goodness as your nourishment. You've got to learn how to take as your nourishment whatever goodness you can give rise to in yourself.

This is where goodwill is very important. If, when you're not wishing any harm on anybody, harm *does* come to you, you're not going to feel guilty or that somehow it was a punishment for your unskillful attitude. You can just chalk it up to past kamma and leave it at that. It's a much cleaner and more bearable way of thinking.

Of course, in the beginning it's easier when you can find goodness in other people. That's something you want to look for, but you're not pretending that they don't have their unskillful side. The Buddha said that it's like a monk who goes out looking for rags to make a robe. He finds some rags that are partly clean and partly dirty, so he tears off the dirty part and takes just the clean part. This means that you don't pretend that the whole cloth is clean. If you realize that this part is dirty, you know it's unusable. But you can still tear off and take the part that is usable. This way you learn to take what nourishment you can find from other people in terms of their goodness. But at the same time, you need to learn how to create your own source of nourishment inside. This is one of the reasons why goodwill practice should not end with just, "May I be happy, may I be happy," as you sometimes hear.

How are you going to feel good about yourself unless you also feel goodwill for others? If you look at your own mind and see that it's narrow and selfish, it's hard to gain nourishment from that kind of mind. But if you see that you do have goodwill for others, that there are others whom you wish well, others that you want to help: Seeing that quality in yourself gives you a lot of encouragement, that whatever other faults you may have, at least you've learned how to develop some goodwill.

The more limitless you can make that, the more nourishing it's going to be. And the more protection it's going to give to you.

Feeling & Intention

April 12, 2012

When the Buddha talks about goodwill, he uses two words to describe it. In one case, he talks about it as a type of right resolve. The word *resolve* here can also mean intention, a way of thinking that you set your mind on. In the second case, he talks about goodwill as a kind of mindfulness, something you determine to keep in mind.

In neither case is it a feeling. In other words, we're not asked necessarily to have feelings of warmth or love or even liking for other people. Goodwill is an intention we want to develop: that we're not going to do harm, and that we would like to see other people act in ways that are not harmful, either toward us, toward other people, or toward themselves. So it's perfectly normal that there are people out there that you don't like and yet you can still have intentions of goodwill for them. This is what the mindfulness is for: You keep in mind the principle that regardless of whether you like somebody or not, you will not act in ways that are harmful for them.

This is an important distinction, because many of us know that there are people out there we have grudges against, people we don't like, and we feel guilty because we don't like them. We feel somehow that we should feel love and warmth for them instead. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding is a mistranslation of the passage in the sutta we chanted just now that talks about caring for your sense of goodwill in the same way that a mother would care for her only child. Sometimes that's mistranslated as having a love for all beings in the same way that a mother would love her only child. But that's impossible. The love you have for your child is very different from the love you would have, say, for someone else in your family, and even more so for other people outside the family, or for people who've really wronged you, or people who've wronged those you love.

What the Buddha is actually saying here is that you want to look after your goodwill the same way that a mother would look after her only child. Meticulously. Thoroughly. Always keeping it in mind. Sacrificing your life for it, if it comes to that. You're trying to protect your intentions, because you know that your intentions are even more important than your physical survival. They shape your life now and can shape it far into the future. And as the Buddha often said, feelings are an unreliable guide to action. There are lots of things we like to

do but either we don't know that they're going to give rise to harmful results, or else we know they're going to give rise to harmful results but we let our likes take over. Or there are things that we don't like to do, even though we know that they're going to give rise to good results. So you have to put the mind in a position where it's not going to let its likes or dislikes take charge.

A lot of that has to do with learning how to talk to yourself in the right way. And that's what right resolve is all about. The ability to talk to yourself skillfully can be strengthened by a different kind of feeling: not emotions, but feelings of pleasure. The mind doesn't operate totally on its understanding of things. Feelings of pleasure and pain do play a role in the way we act, the way we think. This is one of the reasons why we try to give rise to feelings of well-being within ourselves, through the breath, through the meditation: so that we can gain a sense of nourishment, a sense of inner contentment. That sense of inner contentment makes it a lot easier to look at things we have to look at but don't like to look at, or to do things we have to do that we ordinarily don't like to do, or to act in harmless and kind ways toward people we don't ordinarily like.

When the mind is feeling hungry, when it feels a lack of pleasure, it will look for pleasure anywhere. Sometimes it takes pleasure in getting revenge on others, or doing things that we know are really unskillful, or in pretending that those unskillful things are actually okay. The pleasure there is a pretty miserable pleasure.

It's like finding that you have a taste for rotten food. You're embarrassed about it, so you don't want anyone else seeing you eating it. You don't even want to admit to yourself that you like eating it. But then you go ahead and nibble on it in the dark. That's because you don't have a greater sense of well-being inside, so you're really hungry for just about anything that you can think of.

This is one of the reasons why meditating on your breath—giving rise to a sense of fullness, rapture, pleasure—is a gift not only to yourself but also to other people, other beings. If you can create this sense of well-being inside, then even when you're dealing with someone you don't like, you don't feel the need or the hunger to get back at that person or to act on your feelings of dislike. You can see those feelings of dislike as something separate. They're part of the committee of the mind. But just because a committee has a few unskillful members doesn't mean that they have to take over. If you're nourishing the good members of the committee, the good members can get stronger and overrule the unskillful ones.

This comes under the Buddha's teachings on fabrication. There are three ways we fabricate our emotions, our intentions. One is through the way we breathe. And this is something we can have some control over. Try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. Breathe in a way that feels nourishing. Second, there's the way we talk to ourselves about things. For instance we try to keep in mind this

mindfulness of goodwill, that we want to act on good intentions. We don't want to harm other beings. Even though there may be contrary desires in the mind that actually want to harm people, we can say No. We recognize those desires as something we don't want to identify with. And in talking to ourselves in the right way, we can give ourselves lots of good reasons for why acting on skillful intentions really is in our own best interest. It's a lot easier to convince yourself of that and to actually act on those understandings if you have that sense of well-being inside. This is why we start with the breath.

Third, there are perceptions and feelings. "Perception" here means the labels the mind uses, or the images it uses, when you're thinking about a particular issue. You can practice with this in your concentration. You learn how to perceive the breath, to picture it to yourself, in different ways. This is something that's very intimate. Just the way you picture the breathing to yourself can have a huge impact on how you actually feel the breath. And this will have an impact on the mind.

If you can put aside your image of the breath as just the air coming in and out of the lungs and think of it more as an energy that suffuses the body, then when the breath comes in, it doesn't have to fight against the sensations that are already there in the body. Think of it as energizing them, blending with them. That's a different perception. Hold that in mind and see what it does to the way you feel the breath and the sense of pleasure or well-being that arises.

When you practice with the breath, you're practicing with these different kinds of fabrication so you can gain a sense of confidence that you can change them if you want. You practice with good fabrications so that when unskillful fabrications come into the mind you realize that you don't have to take them as your real feelings or your real thoughts on the matter. You can see them as something that's been fabricated in reaction to other people's actions, your own feelings, the things you've done in the past. And if you see that they're unskillful, you're in a position to say, "Let's change it. Let's change the perception, change the way we breathe for the time being, so that we can feel less threatened by this situation." You can change the way you perceive it, change the way you think about it.

And you remember this mindfulness of goodwill: the principle that you don't want to harm yourself, you don't want to harm others. This is important. All too often we view our emotions as something real, as a message from deep inside that this is what we really believe or how we really feel about something. But when you understand that all emotions are fabricated, either through past actions or present actions, you have the freedom not to identify with them. You have the freedom to fabricate or to shape the present in a new way. That's a very useful freedom.

To get the most out of it, we use the Buddha's teachings on the noble eightfold path, particularly right resolve, as our guide. We resolve on goodwill, the principle that we don't want to harm anybody. Even though there are members of the committee that seem intent on harming others or in some sense harming ourselves, we want to strengthen the better members of the committee so that they can win out, so that the choices we do make are skillful, and our original intention to be harmless gets actualized in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

We develop concentration in order to strengthen that resolve and to make it easier to maintain that mindfulness and have it be effective whenever the committee is running all over the place, pulling in different directions. You want to strengthen that mindfulness and that resolve so that they win out more and more consistently. When they finally take over the whole committee, there's no more internal strife.

Empathetic Joy

August 20, 2013

We chant the phrases for the *brahmaviharas* or sublime attitudes every night before we meditate because they're attitudes that really are conducive to getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. You have no ill-will for anyone, no desire to see anybody suffer. You don't resent anyone's happiness; and as for the things that you can't help or can't change, you learn to put them aside for the time being.

All of this helps make for an easy break with all the issues of the day so that you can focus on the work at hand, which is your awareness right here, keeping your awareness focused on the breath.

If you can't be generous in practicing the brahmaviharas, it's really hard to settle down. There's a passage where the Buddha actually says that people who are stingy can't enter strong states of concentration. They mistrust them. A sense of ease comes up, and they don't feel right about it. There's another passage where he says that the inability to enjoy pleasure is a sign of something wrong. This may sound strange. After all, the Buddha has a lot to say about the drawbacks of sensual pleasure. But when pleasure comes, when happiness comes —they use the same word in Pali, *sukha,* for pleasure, ease, well-being, bliss— when any of these things come, you have to learn how to enjoy them. If, after enjoying them, you begin to realize that they have their limitations, you can move on in a mature way. If you're afraid of happiness, your letting go of happiness will be neurotic and unbalanced. You find yourself coming back to nibble at the happiness in secret, or at least trying to hide it from yourself, because the mind *does* crave happiness.

This is where one of the least emphasized of the brahmaviharas is especially useful: *mudita,* which can be translated as empathetic joy or appreciation. Basically, it's an attitude that when you're happy, you appreciate it. When you see other people are happy, other beings are happy, you appreciate it. You don't resent it; you're not jealous of anyone's happiness. If you're jealous of other people's happiness, it's very difficult to enjoy your own. That's a karmic consequence right there. You don't have to wait for the next lifetime. If you have a very narrow heart that resents other people's wealth when it's greater than yours, their intelligence when it's greater than yours, or whatever their good fortune may be: If you resent it when they have it, you're not going to be able to

enjoy it when you gain it yourself.

Mudita is an attitude you extend not only to the results of skillful actions—which is what the happiness is—but also to the skillful actions themselves. When you see someone else doing something meritorious, and maybe you're not able to do it yet, if someone's further along in their meditation or they're able to be more generous, whatever, you learn not to resent that. You appreciate it. And that appreciation in itself becomes part of your own merit.

There's a traditional belief, based in the Canon, that that's what hungry ghosts live on: their appreciation of other people's goodness. They never developed their own goodness enough, and so they need to learn this lesson: not to resent other people's goodness.

You hear stories in Thailand of people having visions in their meditation, and the most interesting ones are those where lots of people without any knowledge of one another find that they have a vision of the same spirit in a particular place. There once was a monk who was stabbed to death at Wat Makut. He had been dealing in Buddha images on the black market. Ajaan Fuang lived right near his dwelling, and this monk didn't like the idea that Ajaan Fuang would be nearby. After all, Ajaan Fuang was a meditating monk, and meditating monks might be awake at 2 a.m., 3 a.m., which was when people would come to this monk with their Buddha heads or Buddha hands, with no questions as to why they were just heads or hands, or where they came from.

So the monk did everything he could to get rid of Ajaan Fuang. This went on for about two or three years. Finally, Ajaan Fuang was invited to start Wat Dhammasathit in Rayong. Soon after he left for Rayong, the monk was stabbed to death. Then, a few years later, Ajaan Fuang went back to the same building to teach meditation again. Every now and then, people who knew nothing about the story and who knew nothing about one another's experiences would tell Ajaan Fuang, "You know, there's this spirit of a bloody monk wandering around the building." And Ajaan Fuang would say, "Okay, dedicate the merit of your meditation to him." They'd sit there meditating for a minute or two, and then they'd say, "He won't accept it." He still carried that resentment of Ajaan Fuang, even after he died. That's a case of someone who can't appreciate someone else's goodness and has to suffer as a result.

But you don't have to look at other realms, just look at the human realm. People who can't bear to see other people's happiness: What kind of mind state is that? When we see it in other people, we regard it as very petty. Yet all too often, we may have that attitude ourselves and not recognize it. So it's good very consciously to develop an attitude of appreciation and empathetic joy when people are doing good things and when they're reaping the results of good actions. That makes the mind very expansive.

It's a form of generosity, a generosity of spirit: that you're happy to see other people doing something that might be better than what you're able to do. That generosity of spirit is a good aid to the meditation, so that when you stay with the breath and it feels comfortable, you don't feel guilty about the fact that it's comfortable. You don't feel ill at ease around the comfort.

Some people feel they don't deserve happiness. Well, the issue of deserving and not deserving happiness never comes up in the Buddha's teachings. There's simply the issue of cause and effect. A good action, an action motivated by a skillful intention, leads to good results. It's impersonal. Unskillful actions motivated by unskillful motivations lead to pain. Each of us has a lot of actions in the past, so there's bound to be good mixed with bad. You don't have to wear off the bad kamma before you can enjoy the good. You simply learn to make the best use of both pleasure and pain when they come along.

The Buddha never talks about having to wear off your old kamma before you can gain awakening. The idea that meditation is a purification that burns away your old kamma is actually a Jain teaching that he ridiculed. And you wonder what he would have said about a passage I read the other day in a Buddhist magazine—that if you can maintain equanimity during sex, that can also be a form of purification. The Buddha had no use for these ideas. You don't have to burn off your old kamma. If you had to burn off your old kamma, he said, we'd never be done. As for the idea of burning off bad kamma by having sex, he would probably have shaken his head in disbelief. But while you're meditating you *can* develop a good expansive state of mind—and empathetic joy is one way of developing that expansive state of mind—that helps to mitigate a lot of the results of your own past bad actions.

In other words, there are potentials for suffering coming from your past bad actions but there are also potentials for happiness coming from your past good actions. We all have a mixed bag. Or in the Buddha's analogy, we each have a field full of seeds of different qualities. There are seeds that will grow bitter fruit, and there are seeds that grow sweet fruit. Just because we have bitter seeds in the field doesn't mean that we deserve to eat nothing but bitter fruit. It means simply that those sorts of potentials are there. If we keep watering those particular seeds, the fruits are going to come. But we have the choice of which seeds we're going to water. So you want the water of your mind to be an expansive attitude, one that can water sweet seeds or else sweeten the bitter fruit in such a way that it's not so bitter.

Empathetic joy is one of the best ways of expanding that attitude. As with goodwill, it's not simply a matter of imagining a pink cloud radiating from your mind. You spread thoughts of empathetic joy first to people that it's easy to feel it for—the people you like, the people whose happiness you're easily happy about.

Then you pose the question in the mind: "Is there anyone else out there whose happiness I don't like? Whose happiness I resent?" And you may think of a few people. Well, ask yourself, "What do you get out of resenting their happiness, what good comes from that?" It's a narrowing of your mind to allow that resentment to take over. And so, person by person, you try to work through it.

In the beginning, it may be hard, but as you get more used to it, the realization goes deeper and deeper that you don't gain anything from anyone else's suffering and you're not lessened by other people's happiness—or their wealth, or their status, or the praise that's given to them, any of the worldly things that we see. You're not lessened by the fact that other people have higher Dhamma attainments than yours or become noble ones. In fact, if you can appreciate the fact that they're there, that makes it a lot easier for you to practice.

So search through your mind. If you see any areas of resentment, use this contemplation to help root them out. This is one more way of expanding the mind to make it a much nicer mind to be in—one that's not narrow, one that's not fearful or resentful. That way, as you settle down with the breath and there's a sense of well-being, you can enjoy it without any sense of guilt or a sense that it may be inappropriate. And when you can settle down with a sense of well-being like that, it becomes a much more solid base for the insight that's going to grow as your concentration grows stronger and you become more skilled at it.

So, if you've been neglecting empathetic joy in your practice, maybe it's a good time to give it a little more emphasis. There will be a brighter world as a result.

Limitless is the Buddha

August 10, 2013

One of the themes that Ajaan Mun would often focus on in his Dhamma talks would be practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. This phrase means many things. One is that you don't try to change the Dhamma to suit your preferences. Instead, you try to bring your preferences in line with the Dhamma —realizing that what the Buddha said was true: that the big problem in life is the stress and suffering we cause for ourselves through our clinging and craving, and so that's the problem we have to focus on. If you start changing the Dhamma in line with your preferences, you're actually giving more rein to the clinging and craving. And that kind of practice simply aggravates the problem.

So you ask yourself: Are you willing to put your preferences aside for right now and give yourself to the practice? The thoughts you like to think about and other things that lie outside the path, you're going to put them down for the time being. You're going to focus right here. Fortunately, the work required by the path is not all unpleasant. There are times when it requires that you put up with some pain and you have to exercise some restraint over your clingings and cravings. There's going to be some resistance. But what does the path ask you to do? Noble things: generosity, virtue. When you meditate, you develop a sense of well-being inside that doesn't harm anybody at all. And that's just the path. The goal is even more harmless, more noble, as in that phrase we chanted just now: admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. The path starts out well, continues well, and its ending is something highly admirable.

So try to develop a sense of conviction and confidence in what you're doing here, that this really is good work, both in the sense that the work itself is pleasant—you're not asked to do anything demeaning, you're not asked to harm anybody else—and in the sense that where it leads is also a very good goal.

Start out by trying to breathe in a way that feels really good, really satisfying inside. You're going to be giving up a number of other pleasures as you practice, but the compensation is that you can develop a sense of well-being by being right here, breathing in, breathing out, simply being very sensitive to the process of breathing. And you're totally free to breathe any way you like. The Dhamma doesn't say you have to breathe long, or breathe short or whatever. Here is one area where your preferences can reign for the time being. What kind of breathing

do you want to focus on now? What kind of breathing would you like to create for yourself to focus on? Go ahead and create it.

As you do this, you're learning an important lesson: There's a fair amount in the present moment that you can shape. So, shape it in a good direction. Turn it into a path, something that goes someplace. All too many pleasures are not paths at all. You experience them and then they're gone, that's it. Or even worse, as you're experiencing them, you're developing a lot of unskillful attitudes around them. Those attitudes are paths in the wrong direction. But here, you're developing a pleasure, a sense of well-being that's harmless, and you're using it to make the mind clearer, to make the mind sharper, more firmly balanced, more firmly stable here in the present moment. It's good work, and it takes you to a good place.

And if at first you don't succeed, then try, try again. In other words, if the mind slips off, just let go of whatever has pulled it away and you're right back at the breath. Pay more attention to the breath this time and also keep an eye out for any warning signs that the mind is about to slip away again. This requires a quality called ardency: that you put effort—you put your whole heart—into doing it well.

Part of ardency is motivated by the realization that if you don't train the mind, there's going to be trouble, both now and on into the future. But there are other ways of motivating your ardency as well. One of them is by having a sense of conviction that the people who found this path and have been carrying it on, transmitting it from generation to generation, are to be respected. Think about the Buddha: He was really serious about happiness. When he had found a true happiness, he was really serious about doing a good job of passing that skill on to other people. It's hard to find teachers like that. So many teachers are pleased just to please other people. It's a lot easier to tell people what they like and they reward you. But the Buddha was not motivated in that way. He seriously wanted to do something of genuine benefit for many generations of people, something that really would make a difference, to help them put an end to their suffering. If they followed the path, that was his reward.

You can also look at the example of all the really inspiring people who picked up that teaching and used it well. We owe them a debt of gratitude. We can also take them as good examples, because they faced a lot of dangers, they faced a lot of pain, and they can be our inspiration as we go through our own difficulties in the practice.

There's a passage where one of the Buddha's students is out in the wilderness and he's sick. And he asks himself, "What am I going to do? Am I going to go back home? NO – I'm going to stay right here and devote myself to the Dhamma, using the mind to overcome the illness and being inspired by all the people who

have done this in the past." This is one of the reasons why it's good to read the biographies of the great teachers, beginning with the verses of the elder monks and elder nuns, and on up to the present. They give you an idea of what human beings can do.

And then you practice.

This is what devotion is: It's not that you're trying to please somebody up there by groveling in front of them. We think about the Buddha's kind intentions and all the effort he put into finding this path, and we show our gratitude, our devotion, by keeping the path open through our practice. Over the centuries, there have been times when the path has been overgrown with weeds, and yet people have come along and cleared away the weeds. It required a lot of work.

Think about Ajaan Mun and all the work he had to do, all the difficulties he encountered, in establishing for himself the fact that, Yes, this path still works. Most of the teachings coming out of Bangkok in those days said that the time for nibbana—even the time for jhana practice—was over. Monks should lower their sights, they said, and help the government set up schools. Ajaan Mun also got a lot of flak from other people for not practicing in the traditional Thai way. But as he said, the traditions of Thai culture, as with the traditions of every culture, are the traditions of people with defilements. If you want a noble happiness, you have to follow the standards of the noble ones, the culture of the noble ones: learning contentment with outside things.

That can often mean accepting the fact that other people don't respect you, they don't like your practice, and yet you can learn to find your delight, not in the things other people can offer, but in developing good qualities of mind, skillful qualities of mind, and abandoning unskillful ones. The sense that you've done something skillful in your thoughts or your words or your deeds: Learn to take delight in that. When you're tempted to do something really unskillful but you're able to say No: Take delight in that, too.

It's so easy when you feel temptation to give into those voices that say, "Well, you might be saying No right now but you're going to say Yes tomorrow, you're going to say Yes in five minutes, so why don't you say Yes now and get it over with." You have to learn how to see through that trick: Tell yourself, "In five minutes I'll make the decision for five minutes from now, but right now I'm deciding for now, and the decision is No." Each time you can say No like that, you're strengthening the mind—strengthening the mind and learning to take delight in the fact that you're strengthening the mind. That way you find it easier to put up with whatever hardships are involved in the practice.

The Buddha concedes that you don't need to deny yourself any pleasures that

are in line with the Dhamma. But if you find that indulging in external pleasures is creating unskillful habits—or even just hanging around in the pleasures of concentration when you should be ready to move on, if you see that happening—you've got to exert extra effort, which may involve pain. So learn how to delight in that. Don't make it the kind of extra effort where you're just gritting your teeth. Find some way to psych yourself up for this.

And one of the ways to do that, of course, is to think about the fact that the Buddha really was an admirable human being and there are so few admirable people in this world. You should treasure those who are. Think of the passage we chanted just now: "The Buddha is immeasurable." The qualities of mind that he developed, the goal at the end of the path that he was able to attain: There's no measure for that. So we're dealing with something that's bigger than an ordinary human being. The Dhamma is also immeasurable; the Sangha is immeasurable. Their qualities are bigger than anything else you can think of in this life. They're not only bigger than creeping things outside, but also bigger than creeping things inside—the creeping defilements and the creeping unskillful qualities that keep eating away at your potential for true happiness.

So as you're trying to stay here with the breath, use these thoughts as motivation for doing it well, giving it more of yourself than you might ordinarily do. This is something that really is worth giving yourself to, because it more than rewards the effort.

Breath Meditation: The First Tetrad

November 26, 2015

Today's Thanksgiving. It also happens to be the full moon night at the end of the rainy season in the Buddhist calendar, the night when the Buddha gave his discourse on breath meditation. So, let's put the two events together: feeling gratitude to the Buddha for having taught us that we can gain awakening by something so simple as watching our breath. That's not the only good thing that comes from watching the breath. Along the way to awakening, as the Buddha points out, you can use the breath to develop many levels of concentration that provide a comfortable dwelling place for the mind in the present moment. The body also benefits if you focus on the breath in the way that he recommends. So it's good both for body and for mind.

Stop and think. Is this something you would have thought up on your own? It's good to remember that we owe these teachings to the exploration of other people, people like the Buddha, who put his life on the line trying to find a true happiness. He tried various paths, studying with other teachers, realizing that their teachings didn't lead to anything deathless. That was what he wanted: a deathless happiness—and that's something to be grateful to him for as well. He kept his standards high and stretched our ideas of what human beings are capable of.

He saw that everyone was looking for happiness in things that would eventually age, grow ill, and die. They themselves would age, grow ill and die. He himself would age, grow ill, and die. And what would be left? "What was noble about that kind of search?" he asked himself. The only noble search, in his eyes, was one that would lead to something free from aging, free from illness, free from death.

So he kept that as his standard. One of the key factors to his awakening was his unwillingness to settle for second best; an unwillingness to be content, as he said, with skillful qualities. If he felt that there was a way in which he could possibly be even more skillful, he'd go for it. So he studied with two teachers. The teachers didn't satisfy him. He subjected himself to six years of austerities, extreme austerities. That, too, didn't get the results he wanted.

Then he remembered that when he was a child, he'd been sitting under a tree while his father was plowing—a phrase that the later commentaries had to deal

with, because they believed that the Buddha's father was a king, and the idea of a king plowing didn't sound right to them, except that he might plow at a royal ceremony at the beginning of the planting season. At any rate, the young prince, or the young Buddha-to-be, was sitting under a tree while his father was plowing. He got into a state of concentration that he later recognized as the first jhana, the first level of right concentration. And the question came to him, "Could that be the right way?" And something inside him said, "Yes."

So he started taking food again to regain the strength he'd need to get into that concentration. Then, on the night of his awakening, he sat down under the Bodhi tree and focused on his breath as a way of stilling the mind. Again, why he thought of that, we don't really know. But it's something to be grateful for, the fact that he was able to find this path, something so simple, something so accessible to all human beings. He pursued it as far as he could go and then taught us how to do it, too.

So it's something to be grateful for. The best way to show our gratitude, of course, is to put it into practice. He went to all that trouble to find a way to share it with others, not so that they would bow down to him, but so that they would actually put it into practice and gain the results. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, the Buddha was not interested in ceremonies. He was more interested in realities. He wanted people to find the reality of the deathless. So this is our way of showing gratitude: by trying to find that reality.

And it's good to keep this in mind: that without the Buddha's teachings, we wouldn't have this method. It's highly unlikely that any of us would have found it on our own or that we would have the courage to pursue it that far. So the method is available. We have the example of people who've followed this method ahead of us and have guaranteed that, yes, it does give the promised results. A lot of the ground-clearing has been done for us.

So let's focus on our breath with a sense of gratitude that we've got this way and it's so accessible. Whatever difficulties it may involve, they're very minor compared to the difficulties faced by the Buddha or by the many people who had to rediscover the Buddha's teachings over time. We've got the central point, the breath, right here.

What does the Buddha tell us to do with it? In the beginning, he says, use your discernment to discern the difference between long and short breathing—something very simple. Ajaan Lee would add that you can discern other differences as well—long, short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Find the breath that's right for you, a rhythm and texture of breathing that the mind can settle down with. As the Buddha said, this method leads to states of strong concentration where there's a sense of well-being, even rapture. So, what kind of breathing would give rise to well-being? What kind of breath would give rise to

rapture? Focus on finding that.

There's a lot that's not mentioned in the instructions. They simply give you ideas of what kinds of questions to ask yourself. So, how do you play with the breath without squeezing it too much, without forcing it too much, so that it does change into a breath that's really pleasurable? Part of this process depends on simply getting the mind very still and trying to be with the breath all the way in; all the way out, like a thread of silk that your finger follows without leaving it, just following, following, following it all the way in; following it all the way out. That smoothes it out.

The remaining steps, the Buddha says, are trainings. After you discern the differences in the breath, you train yourself to breathe in certain ways with certain purposes. You consciously manipulate things in the breath and the mind to get a sense of how cause and effect function within you. For instance, he says, you train yourself to breathe sensitive to the whole body. You try to spread your range of awareness from one spot so that it covers the entire body—and to sense the breathing process as a whole-body process. That fits in with the descriptions of right concentration where the Buddha says that you gain a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, and then you spread it through the body. You let it permeate through the body to the point where it saturates the body throughout.

The image he gives for the first jhana is that of a bathman. Back in those days, they didn't have bars of soap. Instead, they used a powdered soap that you would mix with water to turn it into a lump of dough. Then you'd rub it over your body. You had to knead the water into that lump of soap dough, just the way you knead the water into dough for baking bread. You try to make sure that the whole lump is moistened, but that no water drips outside. So there's an active element at this stage. Once there's a sense of ease and well-being, you work with it, you knead it through the body.

Again, having to learn how to work with ease and well-being so that it spreads through the body does require some skill. If you push it too hard or squeeze it too hard, it's not going to have a sense of ease or well-being anymore. You have to give it space to spread on its own. Open up any of the energy channels in the body that you sense seem to be tight. If you can't think of energy channels, think in terms of the muscles around the blood vessels, the muscles in the tiniest, tiniest parts of the body. Think of them all opening up, so that whatever energy is present can flow through them.

And then, the Buddha says, you breathe in such a way as to calm bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. I was reading a piece recently questioning the standard translation of bodily fabrication, asking, "Why would the Buddha introduce a technical term here?" Well, part of the reason we're doing breath meditation is because we're trying to develop both calm and

insight. Insight requires seeing things in terms of fabrication. So the breath is something that fabricates your sense of the body. In fact, it's the primary thing that fabricates your sense of the body. Without it, you wouldn't sense the body at all. You'd be dead. The body would be dead. The fact that we breathe: That's the element through which we sense the other elements of the body, and can exert some control over them. It's because of the breath that we can even move the body.

So how do you calm it? Usually, the Buddha says, when you calm things down in the mind, you first try to develop a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness. In other words, you don't beat things down and make them still. It's like trying to get a dog to be still. You don't beat the dog to be still. You give it food, and when it's had food, it'll lie down and rest. So in the same way, you've got to feed the mind well with a sense of rapture. The Pali word for rapture, *piti,* can also mean a sense of refreshment. You refresh the mind; give it energy. So breathe in whatever way gives rise to energy.

Once the energy arises, think of it spreading through the body. Sometimes it'll spread on its own. Sometimes it'll do weird things to your sense of the body, distorting your sense of the dimensions of the body or the size of the body. You may feel that you're all head. Or that your body fills the room, or that it's very, very small. Just sit through those distortions. Don't get involved with them. They're signs that your awareness is trying to settle into an area that it's not all that familiar with. Then, after the rapture gives you energy and has done its job, it'll start to subside.

If you find that the rapture is oppressive, you can think of it flowing out the palms of your hands; flowing out the souls of your feet; flowing out your eyes. Or if it feels gross or gets tiresome, you can tune your mind in to a more refined level of sensitivity, like flying under the radar. And things will calm down, calm down.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that the total calming of bodily fabrication comes in the fourth jhana, when your breath stops. Again, you don't stop it by forcing it to stop. You feed the body, you fill the body with good breath energy. You try to connect all the different energy channels so that everything flows very smoothly, very quickly from one part of the body to the other, so if there's any need for breath energy in one part of the body, any excess energy in another part will flow right there.

In other words, you don't have to bring in energy from outside. The energy in the body is already enough. Just get it connected. Your need for in-and-out breathing gets calmer and calmer. The need grows less and less. And eventually you get there, to the point where the breathing stops on its own, but you're still very aware. That's the point where the body is very still. The mind is very still.

Your awareness fills the body. And there you are: right concentration all the way through. Those are just the first four steps in the Buddha's sixteen-step plan, but they're enough to get you started. It's around these four steps that the other steps gather.

So that remark I mentioned the other night, where Stephen Colbert said, "What is this with Buddhism? You wrap yourself in a cloth, you go sit under a tree, and you *breathe?*" Well, yes. Those of us who do it realize that there's a lot to be learned and a lot to be gained by knowing how to engage with the way you breathe. We have a lot to be grateful for, that the Buddha discovered this way to awakening. Even if we don't go all the way to awakening in this lifetime, we can find a way to calm the mind down, to give it a sense of being at home in the body so that it can gain strength and a sense of inner nourishment; so that it can find some peace and can put down some of its burdens. Even if not forever, it can put them down at least temporarily so that it can straighten itself out.

At the same time, as you're working on this issue of bodily fabrication and calming it down, you learn a lot about how the mind relates to the body and how the body relates to the mind. That's the beginning of the insight that will take you beyond ordinary resting into a dimension that really is deathless. This fourth jhana, where the mind settles down to the point where the breath really does stop without being forced: It was from this fourth jhana that the Buddha was able to gain the insight that led to awakening.

So you're sitting right here where the Buddha was sitting. You begin to think in terms of fabrication. What are your intentions doing to shape the breath? How do those intentions shape your sense of the body? How does that happen? This is a good place to answer those questions so that you can benefit from the Buddha's teachings—his kindness in having shared these teachings—and from his courage in having gone out to find the teachings to begin with. As we keep doing this again and again and again, trying our best, that's how we show our gratitude for all that the Buddha and the noble disciples have done for us.

Breath Meditation: The Second Tetrad

November 27, 2015

We live in a world where things are always changing. Sometimes the changes are minor and almost imperceptible. Other times they can be very drastic and sudden. So we look for a refuge, a place that's safe from all the changes that would alter our lives too drastically. We look at our minds for refuge, but what do we see? As the Buddha said, the mind is so quick to change that there's nothing you can compare it to. It's quicker than anything else. So we've got to do something about that, because otherwise we have no refuge at all.

This is where it's good to look at the Buddha's second tetrad in his breath meditation instructions. You focus on the breath. As he said, the fact that you are paying careful attention to the breath: That, in and of itself, is a feeling. It's a strange statement, that an act of attention would be a feeling. I think what he's referring to is the fact that feelings are fabricated. They come from some potentials from the past: the fact that you have this body in this condition right now, this mind in this condition right now. It comes from a lot of things you've done in the past.

But those things from the past are just potentials. What you intend to do right now can decide which potentials you're going to focus on. These present intentions play a very large role in determining which actions in the past really will have an impact on the present moment. It's almost as if you could go back and change things from the past—or at least you change the effect they have. You want to take advantage of that. Ask yourself: What kind of feeling are you fostering in the way that you're being attentive? In this way, the fact that you're paying careful attention to the breath moves you into the area of feelings as a frame of reference, which is the territory of the second tetrad.

The Buddha's second tetrad has four steps. The first is to determine that you're going to breathe in and out with a feeling of rapture. In other words, breathe in a way that gives energy and gives a sense of fullness to the body. And from there, the mind will pick up a sense of fullness as well.

When the Buddha talks about developing rapture, he says that there are potentials in the body for rapture; paying appropriate attention to them is what gives rise to rapture. He doesn't tell you much about what those potentials are. He just signals the fact that they're there.

So where are those potentials? What are those potentials and how do you pay appropriate attention to them? One way you might try to approach this question is to think about some part of the body that's not central to the torso—something, say, out in your hands and your feet—so that you're as far away as possible from the movement of the breathing. Try to relax your hands and your feet as much as possible. If you feel any sense of change in the amount of tension, no matter however subtle it might be in the hands or the feet as you breathe in and breathe out, relax that tension. Relax it. Relax it so that there's no difference between the sensation there when you're breathing in and the sensation there when you're breathing out. Allow it to stay that way. Don't let anything interfere with it. If you can maintain that attention, then you find that there'll be a sense of fullness in those parts of the body. The blood flows into those parts of the body, and there's a fullness that comes with that. See if you can maintain that. And once it's there, see if you can allow it to spread.

If you're focusing on your hands, allow it to spread up the arms. If you're focusing on your feet, of course, allow it to spread up the legs. Let the breath find whatever rhythm allows that sense of fullness to spread up from those parts.

Other people find that a sense of fullness starts in the middle of the chest. Again, allow that part to feel open and relaxed with as little disturbance as possible from the breathing. Once that feels comfortable, then allow that sense of comfort to spread. If it doesn't feel comfortable, then go back to the hands and the feet.

What you're doing is taking a potential and developing it. It may not seem like much to begin with, just the fact that your hands are relaxed. But you protect it. Ajaan Fuang would use the word *prakhawng,* which is the word they use in Thailand for when a child is learning to walk and you're walking behind the child. You're not grabbing onto the child, because you want the child to walk on its own. But at the same time, your hands are a few inches away so that in case the child trips, you can catch it right away. You want to have that same hovering-around kind of attitude toward your sense of well-being.

After a while, the fullness may get to seem a little bit much, so the next step is to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure. And it's a similar sort of thing. Find the areas of the body that feel good as you breathe in, feel good as you breathe out, and see if you can let that sense of feeling good spread. It's different from rapture simply in the sense that it's not quite so full. It's not the same energetic quality. It's cooler, more peaceful.

As you can maintain this, you begin to realize that these feelings begin to have an impact on the mind: the feeling of ease, the feeling of fullness. You want to take note of that fact. This is what the Buddha calls *citta-sankhara:* mental fabrication. These feelings have a direct impact on shaping the mind. Other

things also are coming into play here: your perceptions. As you're focusing on the hands, as you're protecting that sense of well-being, as you're protecting the sense of ease that goes through the body, you have to hold certain perceptions in mind. These are images or words you hold in mind for recognizing things. They're not full sentences. They're just basic concepts or little pictures by which the mind communicates with itself and communicates with the body. Those perceptions will have an impact on both body and mind. They're mental fabrication as well.

Look into your perception of the breathing: Is it getting in the way of your concentration? Is it helping it? If you have a perception that the breath has to struggle in order to get in, that's not a helpful perception. If we picture to ourselves that we only have two little holes—i.e., the nostrils—for the breath to come in and out of the body, what happens when they get plugged up? Even if they're not plugged up, it's an awfully tiny spot for the breath to come in and saturate the whole body.

This is when you want to hold to the perception of the whole body breathing. Think of it breathing even through the pores. That will change the way you sense the breathing. It'll make it a lot easier for the mind to settle down and drop the impulse to push the breath here or pull it there. With the right perception in mind, then when you breathe in, it comes in everywhere easily. Hold onto the perception that the breath is just waiting to come in, and it's just a matter of your allowing it. Won't you allow it? You don't have to do any pulling.

Another good perception to hold in mind is that, as soon as you're aware that the breath is coming in, a subtle breath has already coursed throughout the whole body. If you can hold that perception in mind long enough, you'll see that it really is true. Some people might say that the perception itself is creating that sensation of the breath, but when you use it, you'll see how real it feels and how it's helping you to settle down. So it's a useful perception. Who cares what the scientists, looking from the outside, say about your breath? What you're doing is to investigate how feelings and perceptions shape your mind from the inside.

Then the final step in this tetrad is, as the Buddha said, to allow this process of fabrication, or shaping, to grow calm. In other words, you see which feelings and which perceptions give rise to one level of concentration and then you change those feelings, change the perceptions, to see if it takes you to a deeper level. In technical terms, this can take you all the way to the highest of the formless jhanas. The question might be, "Well, at the fourth jhana, the breath is stopped, so how are you talking about breath meditation on that level and beyond?" I think that what the Buddha is referring to here is that when you're moving from one jhana to another, there has to be a moment, at least, of evaluation. At that moment, there will be some breathing.

You evaluate: "If this perception is too gross, I want to have a more subtle

one." The perception of having a form of the body is grosser than the perception of perceiving the body as just a mist of sensations. The perception of the space between that mist is a more subtle perception still. The perception of the *awareness* of that space: that's even more subtle, more calming than the perception of space. Letting go of the perception of the mind being one with its object: that's even more calming. You finally get to the point where you know where you are, but you don't have any label for it. That's even more calming.

You can pursue this. It takes time. You want to be able to develop the stages. I was reading just now a book on developing jhana in which the author says to stay in a particular jhana for at least five minutes, which is a ridiculously small amount of time.

Once you've got this perception, then you can try to maintain it even when you leave the meditation. Say you've got a perception of space: See if you can maintain that perception as you go through the day. You may not be in jhana, but it's good to hold onto that perception as much as you can. It'll change the way you relate to things. Just think about everything you see as permeated by space. After all, every atom has more space than it has matter. Think of all the space going through your body, through everybody you deal with, everyplace you go, everything you see. And you find that that perception has a really good impact on the mind. This knowledge of perception and feeling and the role they play in shaping the mind is one of the lessons that'll be most useful in learning how to make your mind more reliable.

If you learn how to focus on the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease and rapture, and learn how to access that whenever you need it, your mind will be a lot less irritable. It'll be a lot less likely to regard any incident as just too much to take, where it suddenly snaps and its goodness disappears—its calm, its equanimity, its patience all disappear. If those things can disappear, you're really up the creek. You don't know what your mind is going to do.

But if you learn how to feed it well with good feelings and good perceptions, you'll come to find out which perceptions can help you get through tough situations, the sorts of situations where it's just one long grind. How can you stand up to that sort of thing without letting it grind you down? Can you learn how to perceive things in a way that you're outside them, where they can't reach you? When you learn these skills, then no matter how bad things get outside, you've got something inside that's more reliable, that's yours, a sense of well-being inside that nothing outside can touch. Hold that perception in mind.

The Buddha, when he was teaching meditation to Rahula, taught him as the very first step: Make your mind in tune with the earth. He was teaching Rahula to hold a perception in mind. Just as earth can stand anything that's thrown on the earth, doesn't shrink away from disgusting things, in the same way, you're

going to be dealing with things that are unpleasant but you don't have to shrink away. Hold that perception in mind: Your mind is like earth. You'll find that your patience grows a lot stronger, a lot more reliable, a lot more resilient.

So you've got feelings that you could create simply by paying attention to the breath—and in particular, learning how to pay attention with the right touch. You learn the role of perception in either weakening or strengthening the mind. You don't want a weak mind, so you work on the perceptions that strengthen it. This way you find that you can develop your inner mainstay.

As the Buddha says, the self is its own mainstay. But if the self isn't reliable, that means you have no mainstay at all. If your mind is constantly changing, so quick to change that nothing else can be compared to it, you're really in bad shape. But if you learn that you can use perceptions and feelings to shape the mind—and the way you relate to your breath has a large role to play in this because it gives you a place to stand as you watch this happening—you've got that good breath energy you can draw on to develop the kinds of feelings you need. You find that you can develop a lot more patience, a lot more endurance. The mind can be on a more even keel and much less likely to tip over because you're getting more and more skilled at the things that shape the mind, that keep it in balance. And you can use that skill to a lot of good ends.

Breath Meditation: The Third Tetrad

November 28, 2015

One of the hardest but also one of the most necessary parts of developing meditation as a skill is, at the end of each session, to reflect on at what point in the session the mind was most settled, with the greatest sense of ease; when it was quietest, the most alert, so that you can remember to try to recreate those conditions the next time around. This is hard because we often don't know what to look for. We just think, "That was a really nice state of mind." Then we try to clone it, but it doesn't work, and so we get frustrated. And that leads us to think that, well, maybe the desire to have that state of mind is a bad thing, and we try not to have any desires—but that gets in the way of developing the meditation as a skill.

It's not bad to have that desire. It's part of the desire for right effort. The key to the solution lies, one, in knowing what to look for to begin with; and then, two, when you find that your mind in the next meditation session is not where you want it, getting a sense of what's lacking and how you can make up the lack in order to get the mind where you do want it to go.

One of the most useful sets of instructions for dealing with this problem lies in the third tetrad in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, which builds on the first two tetrads. Remember the first tetrad. You're focused on the body, being sensitive to the breath, sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, and then you calm the process of bodily fabrication, i.e., you gain some rapture and then calm the effect that the breath has on the body so that it gives rise to a sense of ease and well-being. In the second tetrad, you're sensitizing yourself to that sense of rapture and the sense of well-being, and to the perceptions that maintain them. Then you notice how those feelings and perceptions have an impact on the mind. Then you try to calm that impact so that the mind grows more solid and still.

Those two tetrads give you the background for dealing with the third tetrad, which is being sensitive to the state of your mind. It starts with that instruction: Breathe in sensitive to the mind. Breathe out sensitive to the mind. Where's your mind right now? What state is it in? Can you compare it to where it's been before? Can you tell whether it's irritable? Can you tell whether it's sluggish? Can you tell whether it's flighty? If you can, that gives you an idea of which direction you need to go.

The remaining three steps in the tetrad give three alternatives on how to get the mind back in the right place.

The first is gladdening the mind when it's sluggish or depressed. Remember: What are the things that fabricate your state of mind? Feelings and perceptions. Where do feelings come from? You get some feelings from the way you breathe and pay attention to the breath. So if you find that the mind is feeling sluggish, depressed, or discouraged, what can you do to gladden it by the way you breathe to create good feelings and by the perceptions you hold in mind? In some cases, these perceptions might be dealing with the breath. In others, you may have to take a little time off from the breath and think of another theme that gives you encouragement. Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha. You can think about your past virtue, your past generosity, things that you find uplifting. Then you can come back to the breath, but this time with a better state of mind.

If, however, the mind is feeling overly excited, overly energetic, then you want to figure out how to breathe in a way that steadies the mind. And again, this might have to do with just the way you breathe, or with the perceptions you hold about the breath. Or you may have to deal with some other topic. Death is a really good one for steadying the mind. Death could come at any time and it could cut short all kinds of things in your life.

I was reading the other day someone commenting on how if you see aging, illness, and death as dangerous, it's a sign that you're attached, whereas instead you should just see aging, illness, and death as simply a part of this wonderful life we have, so you have to embrace it all. That's not a Buddhist teaching. The Buddha says you've got to see danger in death, that it's going to cut things off very quickly. It could happen at any time. A little clot of blood could get the wanderlust, start wandering around your system, and then get lodged someplace in the heart or in the brain, and that's it. You don't have time to say goodbye to anybody. You don't have any time to give any last-minute instructions or requests. You're just out. And you have no idea where you're going.

And, unless the mind has been really well trained, you have no idea how you're going to react at that point, whether you can trust the mind to make the right choices. If you can't trust the mind to sit here, meditate for an hour, and settle down, it's going to be really hard to trust it when an event like that occurs. So thinking about death gets you more focused on what you've got to do right now, which is to get your mind in shape. That can help to steady the mind.

So again, you're using the breath, you're using feelings, and you're using perceptions to get the mind into the shape that you want. Over time you get a sense of what works in lifting your level of energy; what works in calming it down.

The Buddha talks about using the factors for awakening to lift up the mind and to calm it down. The ones that lift you up are persistence, rapture, and analysis of qualities—i.e., when you try to figure things out in the mind. For example, if your mind is sitting here getting kind of sluggish, you give it work to do, to figure out something. What's going on? Is the breath getting to the right places right now? Which parts of the body are lacking in breath energy? How can you make up for that? In other words, you pose questions. And then you act on the answers you think up. If you act on them well and get good results, then there will be a sense of rapture. Those are the energizing factors for awakening.

The calming factors are calm, concentration, and equanimity. When the mind is antsy, ask yourself: What kinds of fabrications will calm you down? Where is, as the Buddha says, the potential for calm right now? Where is the potential for solidity in the mind right now? Where is the potential for equanimity? Ferret those things out and you'll find the mind gets a lot steadier.

The last step in this third tetrad is releasing the mind. Basically, this has to do with the mind's burdens. There are things holding the mind down or holding it back. And release from these burdens can be of two basic sorts: temporary release and total release. Temporary release is when the mind has been burdened down with thoughts of work or thoughts of school, thoughts of responsibilities at home, and you can get the mind—for the duration of your concentration—out from under those things.

We talked today about developing a perception of wilderness. When you stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon, a lot of your concerns at home and at work seem very, very small. Even though we're not here at the edge of the Grand Canyon, we are sitting under this enormous sky. It's good to go out sometimes at night and just look up at the sky, to get a sense of how enormous it is, how immense it is, and how small a lot of your problems are. That can uplift the mind and lift some of its burdens for a while.

Or you might be burdened with thoughts of sensual desires. Are they preventing you from getting into concentration? Then they're a burden. As the Buddha himself said, when he was beginning to practice he knew that he should put sensuality aside, but his mind was still resistant. The solution was to look at the drawbacks of sensuality and the advantages of getting past it.

This is why we have the contemplation of the parts of the body, of the aging of the body, and of all the illnesses the body is subject to. As you pursue these contemplations properly, you come to realize that the problem is not so much the *objects* for which you have desires, it's your fascination with the *resolves* that hunger for those objects. That's where the real problem is. So you want to look at the drawbacks of those resolves, what they do to the mind. When you can see that they put you in a state that you don't really want to be in, then it's a lot

easier to get past them.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee recommends the reflections that give rise to a sense of *samvega* at the beginning of meditation, so you can think through some of the issues that might come up in the meditation and view them from an angle that reminds you: If you don't get the mind trained, you just keep coming back, coming back, a slave to craving. Like King Koravya: Here he is, 80 years old, and yet he's still wanting to conquer all the lands in all the directions around him, even lands on the other side of the ocean. All for what? A lot of killing, a lot of mayhem, and then he dies. And even though we may not want to engage in killing and mayhem, our lives do involve a lot of struggle. For what? For a few sensual pleasures? Then we're gone.

When you think about that, it gives you a greater sense of samvega that makes it a lot easier to get past sensuality, so that the mind is willing to settle down and just be with the breath, instead of being constantly disturbed by thoughts of going back to sensual pleasures. That's the point where mindfulness of breathing gets you into the first jhana. From there, you can go to the higher jhanas by looking for the things that are burdening the mind within the lower jhanas, and learning how to release yourself from them.

At first, don't be too quick to try to analyze the state of concentration when you get into it. Just see what you can do to keep it going. Then, as you get more and more proficient at keeping it going, you can begin to notice: "What in here is still an unnecessary burden? How can I stay concentrated, but with less effort? How can I do it more efficiently?" When you've worked through all the wrinkles of the breath, you can settle down without having to think about these things. You don't have to do any directed thought or evaluation. Just be one with the breath. That releases the mind from the need to do directed thought and evaluation.

There will still be a sense of rapture there, but then after a while the rapture becomes tedious. It's like food. When you're really hungry, you want as much food as possible, but after you're well-fed, food doesn't seem so attractive any more. In the same way, when the body's really tired, you want as much rapture as possible. But then there comes a point when the body's needs are met; the mind's needs are met. That's when the rapture becomes tedious. It's like having too much food. You don't want to eat anymore. So you can stop feeding on it.

Tune the mind into a more refined level of the breath, get it beneath the radar, and you can release the mind from the rapture. And so on down through the various levels of jhana.

The same principle applies to total release. You look for any rise or fall in the level of stress in the mind, and ask yourself, "What am I doing when the level of

stress rises? What am I doing when it falls?" When you see that you're doing something together with the rise in the stress, and you've had enough of the stress, you let that "something" go.

Basically, it comes back to the principle the Buddha taught Rahula. This is the best way of dealing with delusion. You're not really sure whether you know something, or you may think you're sure you know something but you haven't yet put it into action to test it. So you have to test it. On the outside level, as the Buddha said, when you're going to do something, you ask yourself, "Is this going to harm anybody?" If you think it's not going to do any harm to anybody, you can go ahead and do it. But while you're doing it, look for the results that are coming up. If any unexpected harm comes up, then you stop what you're doing. If you see no harm coming from what you're doing, then you continue with the action until it's done. When it's done, you look at the long-term results. If you see that they're not what you expected, okay, you've learned something. You've seen through some of your delusion.

The same principle applies here with the actions of the mind. You try things out. You thought you knew what went into a good mind state before. When you try it out, then if it doesn't work, you go back and check it again—because these things are fabricated. Our problem is that we're not fully aware of how we fabricate things. But with time, you get more and more sensitive. It's a matter of trial and error, and then learning how to pose questions and to ask yourself, "Okay, what is it that I'm missing?" or "What went into this mind state?" "In terms of bodily fabrication, mental fabrication, what's missing here that I didn't see?" And over time you get better. You develop a skill. This principle can take you all the way to total release.

So always remember that states of the mind are fabricated. You've been putting them together for who knows how long, simply that you're ignorant of how you do it. The Buddha's instructions on breath meditation in the first three tetrads give you some handles on how to figure out, "Okay, what am I doing as I create a state of mind and how can I do it better?" You focus on the issues of the way you breathe, the perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings that these things give rise to. Those are three big things you want to watch; the three big things you want to look for as you try to get more and more in control of the mind—so that, as the Buddha said, you get the mind to the point where if there's something you need to think about, the mind will think about it. If you don't want to think, it'll stop. And that way, you can live with your mind a lot more easily because you understand it a lot more thoroughly.

Breath Meditation: The Fourth Tetrad

December 22, 2015

The Buddha's meditation instructions come in four sets of four, called four tetrads, sixteen steps in all. When people are just getting started, they tend to ignore the last tetrad because they figure that it's just for advanced practitioners. But actually, all the tetrads take place simultaneously. Take the tetrads dealing with the body, with feelings, and with mind states: It's not the case that you first work with the body and then, when that's all taken care of, you work with feelings, and then, when they're taken care of, you work with mind states. You've got to deal with all three simultaneously from the very beginning. You're sitting here breathing and a pain comes up in the body. You've got to deal with the pain effectively or else you won't be able to stay with the breathing. Or a distraction comes up in the mind. You've got to deal with the distraction. You can't wait until you're finished dealing with the breath.

And that fourth tetrad is also there for you to use. It basically gives you instructions on how to deal with obstructions. The four steps are these: You breathe in and out paying attention to inconstancy. You breathe in and out paying attention to dispassion. You breathe in and out paying attention to cessation. Then you breathe in and out paying attention to relinquishment.

Now, you can interpret those steps as applying to a very advanced level of the practice, and they do. But it's also useful to apply them as you're just getting started. You run into an obstacle, like a pain in the leg. Remember that the pain is inconstant. It's not there all the time. It comes and goes. And if you find that the pain is blocking your breath, you have to ask yourself, "What am I doing that's making it block the breath? What image do I have in mind that's getting in the way of the breath flowing smoothly there?" You have to see that image, too, as inconstant. Maybe it's not really true. Try holding another image in mind.

Remember that the breath can go through anything. The atoms in your leg, the ones that you say are pained, are mostly space. So think of the breath going through that space. At the very least, if it doesn't make the pain go away, it releases a lot of the tension around the pain. It makes it a lot easier to settle in because, as the Buddha says in those instructions for feelings, "You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, and you try to breathe in a way that gives rises to pleasure."

So if the pains are getting in the way of the rapture and pleasure, you've got to do something about them. And this is one of the ways of dealing with them, seeing that they're not really as solid or impenetrable or lasting as you might have thought. Even if you have a chronic pain, it comes and goes.

And don't think of the pain as a solid wall. Think of it as something porous. In this way, focusing on the inconstancy of the pain—and the inconstancy of the images that get in the way, that make the pain worse than it has to be, more of an obstruction than it has to be—will allow you to develop some dispassion for your old ways of seeing things. Then, with dispassion, the obstruction those images create can cease.

This is really useful in the meditation because we tend to bring our preconceptions into the meditation, as to what's possible, what's impossible. As when we talk about breath energy flowing in the body: Until you develop some dispassion for your old ways of perceiving the body that would get in the way of sensing the breath flow, you're putting a major obstacle in your path.

The same with obstructive mind states. When a hindrance comes up, the Buddha says in the section dealing with the mind that you should try to gladden the mind, steady the mind, and release the mind. In gladdening the mind, what kind of obstruction is getting in the way of your feeling glad about the fact you're here? Is doubt getting in the way? Is restlessness-and-anxiety getting in the way? Is sleepiness getting in the way? Okay, what do you do to counteract those mind states?

First, you have to see them as impermanent, inconstant. As with sleepiness: All too often when the symptoms of drowsiness come over us, we say, "That's it. Time to stop. Sleepiness has set in and it won't go away until I take a nap." So you have to ask yourself, "Are they really signs that you're drowsy or is this just the mind's way of playing tricks on itself?" Try to find a spot in the body that's not being affected by the signs of drowsiness and then look back at those signs. You see that they come and they go. They may be going around the eyes, like a little fog going through your brain, and if you're the kind of person who likes to sleep a lot, you've learned how to maximize those sensations to make them more powerful than they really are. So you have to step back and say, "Okay just look at this"—because this is a lot of what the fourth tetrad is: Just looking at things for a while and then seeing that they're not as powerful or as constant or as overwhelming as you might have thought. The signs of drowsiness come and go, so when they're gone, make the most of that fact.

The same with restlessness-and-anxiety—the thoughts that pull you away from the present moment, telling you you've got to worry about something else. Well, they too are inconstant. How reliable are they? You might tell yourself, "I've really got to plan for this. I've got to worry about that and I've got to make

arrangements so that this doesn't happen or that doesn't happen." You have to remind yourself that you don't really know what's going to happen in the future. It's very unpredictable. What you *do* know is that you're going to need lots of mindfulness, lots of alertness, lots of concentration, lots of discernment, whatever happens. And where are you going to get those qualities? By developing the mind right now. So, to take care of any eventuality in the future, you're working on your meditation. That's your best way of preparing for future certainties and uncertainties. This allows you to develop some dispassion for those restless thoughts, those thoughts of anxiety. You've seen their allure, but you've also seen their drawbacks. And when you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, you can develop dispassion for them. When you're not feeling any passion for them, they cease. Then you can let the whole issue go—the thoughts that disturbed you, and the fact that you were able to get past them. You don't have to hang onto your success. You let it go, too, and get back to business. That's what's meant by relinquishment. And that covers all four steps in the fourth tetrad right there.

So when you find that there's an obstruction in your meditation—dealing either with the breath or with feelings or with mind states—keep these four steps in mind. First, look at the fact that no matter how insistent or powerful or convincing the breath obstruction or mind state, it's inconstant. The same with a feeling: A pain may have been there for a long time, but it doesn't have to be there always. And even if it is a long-lasting pain, you can learn to look at it as inconstant—coming and going, coming and going, little moments of pain.

An image I've found useful is that you're sitting in the back, say, of a bus or an old station wagon, facing backwards, and as you go down the street, things that come into the range of your vision come in from the side and then immediately go away from you. It's the opposite of when you're sitting in the front, and things coming into your range of vision seem to be coming right at you. Well, think of the pain, those moments of pain, as going away from you as soon as they come into your range of vision, rather than as coming right at you. That changes your relationship to them, and you begin to see them as a lot less lasting and threatening. They come and they're gone. They come and they're gone. So you can breathe around them.

You can also make your awareness go around them so that you don't have to focus so intently on them. Because often that's our problem: We focus on these things so intently that we strengthen them, we solidify them. Our concern with trying to control them turns them into greater obstacles than they have to be. The solution is to see them as little bits and pieces: moments of pain that don't need to be controlled, because they're already passing away.

This applies not only to pain, but also to anger. Anger sometimes seems to be very long and lasting. But actually it has its moments and then it goes. Then we

dig it up again. And it goes again. And then we dig it up again. It goes again. The problem is not the moments of anger. It's the digging it up again. Who's doing that? Well, we're the ones who're doing that. We have a passion for digging up our anger, just as we have a passion for digging up lust, digging up greed, whatever our standard problems are. Once there's a moment of anger, you don't have to say, "Here it is to stay," and latch onto it. Instead, you want to see, "Here, it's come, but it's going to go. I don't have to get caught up in it." Our problem is that the symptoms of anger or whatever hang on in the body, and so we interpret them as signs that the anger is still there. But what's there is just the after-effect. If you can see these things as not as solid as they seem to be, not as powerful as they seem to be, that puts you in a better position to develop some dispassion toward them. The passion is actually the problem. Once you can develop the dispassion, then these things cease. You let go and you move on.

Now, while you're working on your concentration, you don't want to view it as inconstant quite yet. As Ajaan Lee would recommend, try to develop concentration in spite of the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. In other words, you're trying to make this state of mind as constant as possible, as easeful as possible, and as much under your control as possible. That puts you in a better position to fight off a lot of your grosser obstacles.

So the concentration and the ability to fight these things off go together. In other words, you have to fight them off to get the mind concentrated, and the better your concentration gets, the more useful it is in fighting them off. The stronger your concentration, the more constant it becomes. That makes it easier to see the subtle inconstancy of other things. You've got a point of comparison. You see the pleasure that concentration offers and you compare it to the pleasure that these other things—these other feelings and mind states—seem to offer. You realize that what they offer is not that much at all. What you've got here with the concentration is a lot more reliable. Your sense of well-being goes a lot deeper. So, again, you've got a point of comparison. And when it's under your control, you can see how little control you have over these other things. You realize that they're not worth it at all, not worth getting involved with. You can let them go.

It's only at the very end of the practice that you turn the steps of this last tetrad onto the concentration itself, seeing that it, too, has its inconstancy—and you've developed a passion for it. You really do have to develop a passion for the concentration in order to do it well. I was reading a book recently where the author was saying that you don't have to analyze jhana because nobody's really stuck on jhana. But this author was teaching a five-, seven-, ten-minute jhana. There's nothing much there, so there's nothing much there to get stuck on. But if you're using the concentration as your tool for peeling away other things, you've got to learn to rely on it. If you can't rely on it, you're not going to be able to peel

these things away. So you've got to get attached to the concentration to let these other things go.

Ultimately, as other things lose their appeal, the concentration itself becomes your main remaining attachment. When you've reached that point, you can start turning the analysis of inconstancy onto the concentration so that even this—no matter how much you've liked it, no matter how much you've learned to depend on it—has reached the point where the time has come to let it go. You can develop dispassion for it because you see that it, too, has stress. It, too, is not totally under your control. If you try to find a really reliable happiness, you can't stay here. But everywhere else you move, you realize that that would be just another state of concentration. So what do you do? You can't stay and you can't move. Well, there's another alternative. And if you're really perceptive, you'll see what that other alternative is: Let both the staying and the moving drop away. That's when you let go of everything. Everything gets relinquished—even the path—as it ceases and falls away.

That's the kind of insight we're ultimately aiming at. And you get there by learning how to use the tools of this fourth tetrad from very early on, even as you're just settling down with the breath. Is there a pain in the way of getting the breath smoothly through the body? Okay, learn to see it as inconstant. See what perceptions you're holding onto that are maintaining the pain, strengthening the pain. Learn to see them as inconstant, too, so that you can feel some dispassion for them. Then they'll cease, and you can let the whole issue go. You'll realize that what's left doesn't provide an obstacle to the breath. It allows the breath to flow smoothly through the body so that you can gain a sense of rapture. You tune out of the pain and into the rapture.

The same with any mind state that comes up—things that are more depressing; things that are more disturbing: See them as just coming and going. See also that you've got something here that underlies them, that's more lasting: the sense of the breath staying there all the time. That's actually a lot more solid than the coming and going of a thought. That allows you to feel some dispassion for the thought, and to let it go as it falls away, as it *will* fall away. This allows you to let go of the whole issue so you're not digging it up again.

So this last tetrad is useful all the way through the practice. Keep it in mind as you're sitting here. It's a very useful tool from the very beginning to the very end.

The Message of Mindfulness

April 19, 2012

In the Buddha's instructions for breath meditation, after you've got your body in position, he says to establish mindfulness to the fore. In other words, you make up your mind what you're going to try to remember as you meditate, and bring that to the forefront. Make it stand out in your mind. In Thai, they say to set your mind up. Of course, what often happens after you've set your mind up like this is that it falls over. You're determined to stay with the breath, but something else comes in. Either an outside noise distracts you, or other thoughts in the mind come up. And you go wandering after wherever they may lead you.

This is why we have to be alert to notice when this is happening. Then mindfulness kicks in again to bring you back to the breath. The act of reminding here is very important, because the mind so easily forgets. In the beginning, when you remind yourself, you have to use full sentences. Use short commands: "Stay here. Stay with the breath. Don't wander away." Whatever it takes to keep you remembering to stay with the breath. Then you try to remember whatever other things you need to do with the breath in order to make it easier to stay. You may remind yourself to breathe comfortably, or to focus on a certain part of the body.

This need to remember is one of the reasons why we have to study the texts at least to some extent. A couple of months back I was asked to give a talk on the topic of whether it really is necessary to know anything about what the Buddha said if you're going to meditate. Now, if you think of mindfulness simply as being aware, there's not that much that you would need to study. Your awareness is right here, it's happening all the time, so what else do you need to know? But when you realize that mindfulness means keeping something in mind, you realize further that you need to study some to know what things are the right things to keep in mind while you practice.

Sometimes this involves keeping in mind your motivation: why you're here. Sometimes it involves keeping the four noble truths in mind: remembering that we're here to look for stress, its cause, its cessation, or the path to its cessation. And then you have to remember the duties that go along with those four truths. If stress or pain comes up, you have to remember, "Don't run away," because it's so easy to want to avoid the pain, or to try to push it away. But our duty with regard to the stress and the pain is to comprehend it. That means we have to

watch it. We have to watch it steadily.

In fact, your gaze has to be steadier than the pain, so that you can begin to see how the pain comes and goes—as well as what comes and goes along with it. If you see that there's an uptick in the level of your stress, you can ask yourself, "What did I think just now? What did I do just now?" Or if the level of stress goes down, what did you do? Only in that way can you see the relationship between cause and effect. It's not enough to say, "Oh, stress is inconstant, sometimes it comes, sometimes it goes," and just leave it at that. The coming and going has a cause, and you want to look deeper into where the cause is while it's happening. You've got to remember this. Once you see the cause, then you remember your duty with regard to the cause: Let it go. In other words, stop doing whatever it was that caused the stress to come.

To do this requires not only steadiness of mind but also a sense of well-being. That's why we practice concentration. The Buddha compares concentration to food. You're a soldier in a fortress at the edge of a frontier. You need food in order to fight off the enemy—in other words, your defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion. Your mindfulness needs food, too. Your mindfulness is the gatekeeper of the fortress, watching whoever might want to try to come into the fortress, remembering who's a friend and who's a foe.

Mindfulness, you know, doesn't just sit there and watch both the friends and the foes coming in. If someone's a friend, mindfulness remembers to allow him in. If someone's a foe, mindfulness remembers to keep him out. In other words, if you see unskillful mental states arising, you don't want to allow them in to destroy your concentration. Both the soldiers, which are right effort, and the gatekeeper, right mindfulness, require food. Right concentration provides the food and nourishment that gives your mindfulness and efforts the strength they need to watch pain, or to watch stress—physical or mental—and not feel threatened by it, not feel overwhelmed by it. The food gives you strength.

This is why you have to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, stay with the breath. And not just *stay* with the breath: There are further steps in breath meditation. When you know the breath well, you try to be aware of the whole body, staying where the whole body is as you breathe in, staying where the whole body is as you breathe out.

When you're aware of the whole body, you begin to see how the breath has an impact on different properties of the body: how it affects the energy flow in the body; how it affects the sense of warmth or coolness in the body; how it affects the blood pressure—not only the rate of the blood pressure, but where the blood is being pushed.

If, when you breathe in, you have a feeling that the energy has to come up,

up, up, it's going to push the blood up into your head. Which may be good sometimes, especially right after a meal when all the blood is settling down into your stomach, and you need some blood to come up to your head in order to stay awake. But there are other times when too much blood in your head leads to a headache.

So you have to remember to notice how the flow of the breath energy has an impact on these different processes in the body. Then you try to adjust them. First you give rise to a sense of fullness and well-being, and then a sense of calm. These are some of the things you have to remember. The main duty of mindfulness is to remember these things. When you read how they're described in the texts, they're in full sentences. These are verbal fabrications: "I will breathe in sensitive to the whole body. I will breathe out sensitive to the whole body." You try to remind yourself that way. "I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication. I'll breathe out calming bodily fabrication." And all the way through breathing in sensitive to mental fabrication—perceptions and feelings—breathing out sensitive to mental fabrication. The steps don't mention verbal fabrication, but each step is in itself a form of verbal fabrication: the way you remind yourself of what you want to do as you breathe in, what you want to do as you breathe out.

Then, as the mind begins to settle in, those fabrications grow more subtle. When you're able to stay well with the breath, the breath feels good. There's a sense that the mind begins to dissolve into the breath. The mind and the breath become one. Your awareness fills the body. The breath fills the body. At that point, you can drop the verbal fabrication. But this doesn't mean you drop mindfulness. At that stage, mindfulness becomes a perception. It simply uses perceptions as its means to remind you of what to do. You may have a mental image of the breath. Or a mental image of the spot where you want to stay focused. Or just the word, "breath." At that point it's not a full sentence, it's just a word. It doesn't count as verbal fabrication any more. It's now just a mental fabrication. It's a perception. And that becomes your marker, your reminder of where you are, where you want to be, what you want to do.

At this point your hindrances are far away; disturbances are far away. They may be nibbling at the edge of your awareness, but they don't really pose any threat. This is why mindfulness can get simpler. Its messages to you get simpler: just "breath, breath, breath."

Or you may have a visual image of how the breath is flowing in the body. Just hold that image in mind. That, too, is a perception. That becomes the means by which mindfulness stays maintained. From there it progresses. As you go deeper and deeper in concentration, the perception gets more subtle. It gets more refined. But all the way through, it's the means by which you remind yourself of

where you are, what you're doing, and what you might be doing better.

So there are times in the meditation when mindfulness is a verbal fabrication. There are other times, as the concentration gets stronger, when mindfulness becomes just a mental fabrication. The messages you have to give yourself get simpler.

It's the same as when you're trying to steer a sailboat. If there are a lot of gusty winds, a lot of waves, the hand with which you hold the rudder has to clamp the rudder really tightly, and you have to use a lot of strength to make sure that the boat doesn't tip over or go off course. But when the wind is light and steady, and the water is smooth, all you have to do is just barely touch the rudder and you stay on course.

It's the same when you're settling down. In the beginning, it takes a lot of work, a lot of determination, and a lot of reminders: "Stay here, stay here, don't wander off." As the mind begins to settle down, though, then the nature of the mindfulness grows more subtle. You do have to be careful not to drift off when the breath gets subtle, but the nature of your warning to yourself, the nature of your reminder, gets more subtle.

Just remind yourself: "Whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out." That's it. Or just, "whole body, whole body," especially when the breath grows still. And so on with the more subtle levels of concentration. When you go into the formless levels, it's more an image of space, the space around the body, the space permeating throughout the body, in between every atom. Just hold that image, that perception, in mind. Or the image of "knowing, knowing, knowing." Those are your reminders.

So the reminders in the beginning require a lot of effort. And sometimes your reminder to yourself can't be gentle. You've got to yell at yourself: "Why are you wandering off? Come on back!" But as the mind gets more tame and gains a greater sense of ease, well-being, and refreshment in the meditation, then it's a lot easier to stay here. That's one of the reasons why we work with the breath, to make the work of mindfulness easier. Its messages can become simpler, more gentle, but still effective.

This is how the concentration develops as a skill as you move from the step of getting the mind to be with the breath or establishing it on the breath, to maintaining it. Setting it up is one thing. Keeping it set is something more refined.

Strength for Stillness

April 30, 2012

It's a great night to meditate. There's a gentle drizzle coming down. Looking out, all you can see is the fog of the drizzle. Everything turns your attention back inside.

So what have you got here? You've got the breath, coming in and going out. And a mind that may or may not want to settle down. Or a mind whose various committee members may or may not be in agreement about settling down. So try and find the members that want to stay with the breath, that want to look inside, and strengthen them.

How do you strengthen them? First through conviction, the conviction that this is a good thing to do, this practice we're doing here. Something taught by people of no defilement: people who have found true happiness; people who have no ulterior motive in teaching this to anyone else. They'd found that this method worked. They'd tested it inside and passed it on to others, who have passed it on to us. And so now we have the opportunity to practice.

Then there's the strength of persistence, which is a matter of coming back, coming back, coming back, figuring out how much energy you have to put into this right now, the kind of energy you can sustain. It takes a little while to get the right balance. The image the Buddha gives is the tuning of a lute. You try to tune the strings so that they're not too taut, not too loose, so that they give just the right sound. This is a skill that comes more and more with practice.

Then there's the strength of mindfulness. You try to remember: This is really what you want to do. Remember all the various reasons you have for wanting to be here. And those reasons point you to what's happening with the breath right now. If you're going to see anything about the mind, you've got to see it here in the present moment. So you want to look carefully, you want to look skillfully, so as to get results.

The practice of mindfulness involves bringing three qualities to your practice: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Ardency is the quality of wanting to do it well. It's the element of will in the practice.

Alertness is the attention you're paying to see what you're doing in the present moment, seeing what's actually going on. Is the breath coming in? Is it going out? How is it going in? How is it going out? Does it feel good? If it doesn't

feel good, then you can bring in some more ardency to pay careful attention to what you're doing here. You can experiment and see what's working, what's not working. Mindfulness is what reminds you as to why you're here, reminds you of what you've done in the past that's worked, what hasn't worked, to get the mind to settle down. You want to bring that to bear as well.

You see these three qualities in all kinds of activities. Years back I was reading a piece by Cicero. He was talking about how the mind has three functions: will, attention, and memory. These functions correspond to ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Of course, Cicero had a different use for these faculties. He was a lawyer who wanted to win people over to his side. He gave speeches trying to influence people's opinions, so he wanted to draw on their memory, he wanted to capture their attention, so that they would get their will in alignment with his. Basically this is how you look at the mind when you're trying to persuade it. You have to speak in a way that captures your audience's attention. If you want them on your side, you've got to draw on their memories, things they're fond of, things they believe in, things they hold dear, or fears that you have in common, to get them to focus their will on the direction you want them to go.

So in this way, when you're trying to get the committee of the mind to settle down, you're acting like a lawyer. Try to remind the various members of what's good in life, why the practice is something you really want to develop. You have to catch their attention to remind them, to get them in line with your will, which is to do this well.

A few years back, I was reading an interview of a famous pianist from Austria. He was giving a farewell concert tour here in the States. And in the interview he talked about what it was like to play the piano, what functions were going on in the mind. As it turned out, they were the same three functions. He was trying to listen carefully to what he was playing as he was playing it: That's alertness. At the same time, he had to remember what he had in mind when he sat down to play the piece. He had to remember what the piece was, and also how he'd been playing it up to that point: That's mindfulness. That was so that the present note would fit in with what he had been playing up to that time. Then the next question is, how to play the next note. How do you want this note to lead into the next note? Do you want to go along with your original intention? Or have you found something better? Is the way you're playing moving in an interesting new direction that you want to explore? Or do you want to keep things in line with the original intention? And whatever your decision, how do you carry it out? This is a function of ardency. This is how the mind functions when you're playing the piano well, and it's all a matter of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency: the same three functions that we're developing right here.

So as you're settling down, think of yourself as being like a lawyer, trying to

convince yourself to stay here, remembering your reasons for staying here. Get everybody on board. When the mind finally does stay with the breath and it seems like it's settling down, then you're more like a musician. There's less need to persuade the mind to actually stay here. The use of your memory and your will gets a lot more fine-tuned: Just remembering enough to keep the mind with the breath and willing it just enough to keep it pointed in the right direction. You're getting a higher use out of these three functions of mind, and this way you strengthen your practice again.

This brings you to the strength of concentration. Mindfulness is not a state of mind free of agendas. It has a very strong agenda: You want to move the mind to stillness because you realize that this is an essential part of the path. The function of mindfulness is to remember that, so you don't forget where you are and you don't forget your purpose for being here. You don't forget *how* to stay here.

So you evaluate how things are going and make adjustments as is necessary. That helps you to settle down. The mind can then move in with the breath, get a sense of unification with it, getting into strong states of concentration. That really strengthens your practice and strengthens your sense of well-being right now.

Then there's the strength of discernment. As you watch what you're doing and you notice what's skillful and unskillful, that use of evaluation and concentration actually becomes an important part of discernment. It's how the two qualities go together. Ajaan Suwat would often speak of this. He'd say, make it your signal in your mind, something that you keep focusing on: Where is the disturbance? Where is there stress? That's something that needs to be looked into. That's where you're going to find ignorance. Where is there anything in the mind that's disturbing your peace? That's the problem. The peace itself is what you rely on so that you can see things clearly.

You need the strength to see them clearly—the strength to *want* to look at them. If you're not feeling well-nourished by the breath, if your good committee members are feeling weak, you're not going to be willing to look into the mind's problems. You're a lot more likely to want to place the blame on things outside. The mind claims that the reason it's not at peace is because of this or that disturbance from somebody else, something else outside. But as you develop a sense of well-being inside, you see more and more that the real issue is not so much what's happening outside, it's what's happening inside. It's not that you're placing blame inside. You're simply pointing out that this is where your opportunity for solving the problem is.

The other day someone was asking why it is that we keep focusing on the problems inside. Aren't there problems outside? Of course there are problems outside, but the reason why your mind is weighed down is because of the problems inside. And those are problems you can do something about. If you

haven't straightened out the problems inside, you probably have a pretty messy idea of how to straighten out things outside. Sometimes, in your efforts to straighten out outside things, you make them worse.

So you want to be confident that you're coming from a good place: a place of strength, a position of strength, a position of well-being. That's why we look inside to see where there's stress and what can be done about it. Then all the good parts of the mind become strong.

Your conviction, your persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment: Keep focusing them inside here. As I said, the weather is helping us tonight. The drizzle outside is like a blanket. It gives you a sense of security, and allows you to focus all your attention inside.

A Clear Agenda

February 14, 2012

If you read Ajaan Lee's autobiography, one of the things you notice is the extent to which he would make vows. He'd sit and meditate and have a purpose: a problem he wanted to have clarified, or a question for which he wanted an answer. He would pose it in his mind: "I want to sit here until I get this cleared up." Then he'd drop the question and go into concentration. As his practice developed, the questions he would ask himself and things he wanted to know would get more and more refined.

So you might find it a useful practice as you meditate to ask yourself: "What am I here for?" There's got to be a purpose to what you're doing. Sometimes we hear that mediation is all about having no agendas and not trying to change anything at all. But I've never seen the Buddha describe it that way.

You've got to have a purpose. Think about the four noble truths. They're truths with a purpose: to help you end suffering. Where in the four noble truths is your purpose today? When you see the Buddha's definition of ignorance, it doesn't mean having preconceived notions. It doesn't mean trying to change things. Ignorance means not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

For most of us, that definition of ignorance describes the normal state of our mind. We're thinking about other issues, other problems, usually based around our sense of who we are and what we need to keep who we are going—or around the people, the relationships we love, to keep them going as well. Those kinds of issues, those kinds of questions the Buddha said, are ignorance from the point of view of trying to put an end to suffering.

So even though you may have responsibilities in the world, put them aside at least for the time being. The mind will be a lot stronger if you can. You'll also find that there are areas within you where you're creating a lot of unnecessary suffering. That suffering is weighing you down. When you're weighed down, you're less able to deal with your responsibilities. So putting the issues of the world aside is not an irresponsible act.

That's one of your first agendas. It's written into the basic refrain for right mindfulness: subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. All the issues you have about what you want in the world or how you're upset about the world, you just want to put those aside. If they come up in the mind, you put

them aside.

I've been reading different books on mindfulness and one of the strangest things I've found was in one book where the author said that the Buddha tells you never to interfere with anything that's happening in the mind. But that right there conflicts with the basic formula: putting aside greed and distress, or subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.

That part of the formula means that you've got to put aside anything that gets in the way of your seeing things simply in terms of the four noble truths. That takes a lot of effort. Sometimes the effort requires a lot of ingenuity on your part; sometimes it's just a matter of watching things, allowing them to subside on their own. This varies from case to case. But even just watching things has an agenda. You're doing it because you want to understand them, or you've found that that's the most effective way of dealing with that particular problem, that particular distraction, at that particular time. We deal with these things because we're here to figure out why we're creating unnecessary suffering and what we can do about it.

Part of what we can do about it, of course, is to develop the path. This is where we're working specifically on the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. They all go together. And they have to be informed by right view. So those are the factors we've got to get going. Right view itself has an agenda: You want to comprehend suffering so that you can put an end to it.

How does that relate to the breath? Because right view tells you that if you want to put an end to suffering, you need to develop right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, and you're using the breath as a focal point for all three of these factors. How are you going to get the mind to stay settled down with the breath? That's the effort right now.

As for right mindfulness, you keep the breath in mind. And regardless of whatever else comes up, you try to relate it to the breath. Feelings come up and you relate them to the breath. "How does this feeling of pleasure or pain relate to the breath? Is it caused by the way I'm breathing? Or is it completely irrelevant?" Say that there's a pain someplace in the body: How does that relate to the breath? Experiment a little bit to find out. Change the way you breathe and see if that changes the pain. Breathe around the pain; breathe through the pain, from the top, the bottom, from the left or right. Change the way you think about the pain and see what that does to the way you breathe in reference to the pain. There are lots of ways to experiment. If nothing seems to work, then you just allow the pain to be there, while you work with other issues in the body. Try to create a sense of well-being someplace else.

This then shades into right concentration. The Buddha says that as soon as

you get sensitive to what long breathing feels like and what short breathing feels like, you try to expand your awareness to fill the whole body. Then you look out for what he calls bodily fabrication. This is the intentional element that goes into the in-and-out breath. He says to calm it down. How do you calm it? You're trying to make things more comfortable so that the breath feels less laborious and the body feels at ease. You change the rhythm of the way you breathe. You can make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. You can think of breathing in different parts of the body. If you notice that one set of muscles seems to be doing all the work, give those muscles a holiday. Say, "Okay, for the next few minutes you don't have to do any breathing work at all." And see how the rest of the body responds. Other parts of the body, other muscles will pitch in. They'll do the breathing work for a bit.

You can also change the way you think about the breath, the mental labels with which you perceive it. Sometimes when we think about getting the breath energy to spread through the body, we're trying to push it through other sensations that are already there in the body. And sometimes that creates pressure, friction, a sense of discomfort. So change the perception. Try to think of the in-and-out breath just simply filling up the sensations of the body that are there, without having to run through them. Or think of it slipping through the spaces between the other sensations without pressing on them. It simply suffuses through the body, with a minimum amount of friction, a minimum amount of pushing or pulling. See how that perception changes your sensation of the breath and the extent to which your sense of the body is being fabricated by the way you breathe.

There are lots of things to play with here, lots of things to adjust, lots of questions you can ask yourself around the breath. When the mind has trouble settling down, is it because of the way you breathe? Or is it because of the way you perceive the breath? If you perceive the breath as a more subtle energy suffusing the body, then think of all the breath channels in the body being connected out to every pore. Just hold that perception in mind and see how the body responds.

If you find a sensation that feels really good, what can you do to maintain it? You can't clamp down on it, because that'll spoil it. It's like seeing a beautiful bubble and wanting to catch it, but of course, the act of catching it destroys the bubble. But suppose that the only thing that's going to cause the bubble to break is the wind. In that case, you can cup your hands around it and protect it.

It's similar with really comfortable sensations in the body, especially ones that come from changing the way you breathe. How do you cup your mind and other sensations around them? How can you maintain that perception? How can you maintain that lightness of touch?

As Ajaan Fuang once said, there are basically three stages to the meditation. One is learning how to do it. The second, once you've done it, is how to maintain it. You don't want to just have one little flash of quiet. You want the quiet to stay. So once it's there, how do you relax around it so that it stays without your trying to grab hold of it? Remember, grabbing hold is not the way things like this are maintained.

There was once a woman in Thailand who was meditating in the chedi on the hill at Wat Dhammasathit, and I happened to be watching her meditate. All of a sudden, she reached out as if she were trying to grab something in front of her, fell over, and then looked around to see if anybody was watching. She looked very embarrassed. Later she told me, sheepishly, that she'd had a vision of a golden tray floating in front of her, and her instinct was to grab it. Of course, that destroyed the vision.

So when you find something that's really nice, how do you maintain it? How do you relax around it? How do you give it space? How do you protect it without bursting the bubble? That's an important skill right there.

If your concentration has gotten to the level where it's solid, then you're ready for Ajaan Fuang's third stage: putting your concentration to use. You ask can yourself, "What do I need clarified?" Follow Ajaan Lee's example. You pose the question in your mind. Then you drop it and get into concentration to see if the stillness of the mind will yield an answer.

If the issue is related specifically to what you're doing right here, right now, you approach it differently: Experiment with your breath, your perceptions, and look at what happens as a result. If nothing seems to be happening and you can't figure anything out, just sit and watch for a bit. See what you can observe; see if you can notice anything unexpected in the body or the mind.

So sometimes the meditation involves experimenting, changing this and changing that to see what else gets changed. Sometimes the experiment is just sitting and watching. But either way, there's a purpose. And whether you make a formal vow about trying to figure something out in the course of the meditation, or simply pose a question in your mind and start poking around and exploring, always remember that there is a purpose for being here. We're trying to comprehend suffering to the point where we can abandon its cause. The way we do that is by developing the factors of the path. That's the framework that gives meaning to everything we're doing.

So always try to keep that larger framework in mind. As for anything that gets in the way or obscures that, remember the Buddha's instructions: You try to subdue it.

And that's how you keep on track.

The Wisdom of Ardency

July 2, 2012

All of the factors of the path build on right view, which means that they all contain an element of discernment or wisdom. The question sometimes arises: Where in the practice of right mindfulness is the element of wisdom? There's a general tendency to see it in the quality of *sampajañña,* or alertness. But alertness just notices what's happening. When things are there, it knows they're there. When they're not there, it knows that they're not there. This can serve as a basis for discernment, but it's not discernment in and of itself.

Ajaan Lee was right, I think, in identifying ardency as the discernment element in mindfulness practice. Ardency is defined in the texts as the feeling you have when you realize that there are unskillful mental states in your mind and they're dangerous; that if you don't get rid of them there's going to be danger. If you don't give rise to skillful states, there's going to be danger. This quality is very closely related to heedfulness. And the Pali term for ardency, *atappa,* is very closely related to *ottappa,* which is the fear of evil, a sense of compunction, a sense of conscience: the realization that you can't be lazy or apathetic, just watching things arise and pass away.

With ardency and compunction, you know that you're causing stress with your actions and that the wise reaction, of course, is to try to stop the kinds of actions that would cause stress and suffering. This is why it's wise. And it corresponds to something I've felt for a long time. You sometimes see scholars of Buddhism who give the impression that they know better than everybody else. Those poor stupid people who are practicing aren't as wise as the scholars: That's what the scholars think, but the scholars just sit there and read the books and talk about what they've read. The wise people are the ones who realize they've got unskillful qualities in their minds, that those qualities are causing suffering, and that they've got to do something about it. The best use of the Dhamma is not to talk about it, but to use it to get rid of that suffering.

It's in figuring out what you've got to do to act more skillfully: That's where the wisdom lies. That's where the discernment lies.

So you need to develop a sense of how important your actions are. Wisdom is something that has to lead to action. There is wisdom in the action, or you could say that the practice here is wisdom *in* action: the willingness to look at the

events coming up in the mind and to step back from them just enough to notice, "Where do these things lead? Are they skillful, or are they unskillful?" That's where wisdom can begin.

Ardency, of course, is very closely related to the factor that comes before right mindfulness, which is right effort. Right effort builds on right view in the sense that it makes the distinctions between skillful actions and unskillful actions, skillful qualities of mind and unskillful qualities of mind, and then it tries to do something about them.

You have the duties of the four noble truths. You try to comprehend stress, abandon the cause, realize the cessation of stress, and develop the path to the cessation of stress. The various duties of right effort, which are closely related to ardency, follow from that—such as the abandoning of the second noble truth. That comes under trying to prevent unskillful qualities from arising and to abandon the ones that have arisen. Then there's the developing of the path, the fourth noble truth, which corresponds to trying to give rise to skillful qualities that haven't yet arisen and then to develop them further when they have arisen. As you try to bring that development to its culmination, you have to comprehend the first noble truth so that finally you can realize the third.

All of this has to be driven by desire. The element of discernment relates very closely to desire. What kinds of things do you really desire in life? How do you want your life to play out? What you desire in life is very important—and the realization that it's important is an essential part of wisdom.

All too often we hear that we shouldn't desire anything, that we should learn how to just stop wanting. But for what purpose does not-wanting serve? There's a desire hidden in there. As Ajaan Maha Boowa points out, the only people who have no wants at all are those who are dead. Even arahants have preferences. They would prefer to see people reach the end of suffering just like themselves. They would prefer to see people not harm one another. Of course their happiness doesn't depend on it. That's why they're free. But the fact that they're free doesn't mean that they lack compassion or discernment or powers of judgment.

What this means, of course, is that we have to look at our lives in the light of the four noble truths along with their duties, and realize there's work to be done.

A common recommendation among the forest ajaans is that you think about the time when you're going to die and ask yourself what kind of life you would like to look back on. If you looked back on your life and realized, "I wasted all that time. Time that I could have devoted to being on the path was just thrown away. Instead of abandoning the causes of stress, I was developing them, and instead of developing the path I was abandoning it"—There'd be a lot of regret if that was the kind of life you had to look back on.

The kind of life you want to look back on is the one that, whether or not you had come to the end of suffering and stress, you could say, "At least I put in my best effort. I tried with all my ingenuity, all my discernment, all my energy. My time wasn't wasted."

Wisdom begins with the reflection on death: the fact that your life is going to end, that many things will just disappear with the end of life, but some things will not disappear. There will be a continuity, and you want to make sure that the continuity will be good. To make sure of that, you want to make sure that your continuity is good right now.

What are you doing? As the Buddha has you ask yourself: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past, fly past?" What sort of person are you becoming? Are you becoming an ardent person? Or are you becoming a lazy, complacent person?

The wisdom lies in the ardency, the realization that there are dangers out there and in here. As I said, this is related to heedfulness and the realization that you can also do something about it. Then you try to figure out *how* you can do it, because there are members in the committee who say, "Well, I'd much rather relax right now, or take things easy, or I need my rewards of pleasure. I can practice tomorrow." How are you going to deal with them? That, too, is an element of wisdom. Knowing that there are things that you like to do, but they're going to cause harm down the line: The wisdom lies in knowing how to talk yourself out of them. There are things you don't like to do but are going to give rise to good results down the line: How do you talk yourself into doing them? That, the Buddha said is a measure of your discernment.

So the discernment is all in the action. It's not in reading the books, or observing other people, or in coming up with alternative ways to spend your time.

You hear about more and more people getting involved in what they call engaged Buddhism. They're looking down on people who meditate, saying that meditators are selfish. Well, that's not the Dhamma speaking. That's people's defilements speaking. The best thing you can do for the world is to learn how to engage with your defilements in a way that puts an end to them. That's where your Buddhism should be engaged. Because otherwise your defilements just keep burning you, and through you they burn other people. There's wisdom in realizing that, and wisdom in following through with that realization: realizing you've really got to do something about your mind. The ardency with which you set out on that task is the measure of how wise and discerning you're becoming.

Feelings Not of the Flesh

August 23, 2012

When the Buddha talks about focusing on feelings as a frame of reference, he talks about two main kinds: what he calls feelings of the flesh and feelings not of the flesh. The distinction doesn't have to do with the difference between physical and mental feelings. Feelings of the flesh can be physical or mental. Feelings not of the flesh can be physical or mental. The difference lies in where they come from, the issues they're related to.

Feelings of the flesh refer to the sense of pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain you feel when you meet either with things that you like, in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations—those would be pleasures—or with things you don't like in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations—those would be pains—or the times when you're on an even keel, neither pleased nor displeased by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations you encounter in the course of the day. These kinds of feelings can arise pretty willy-nilly depending on your mood, depending on your attitude, depending on the situation around you. They're the feelings you tend to encounter most often.

As for feelings not of the flesh, these have to do with the practice. And it's right here when you begin to realize that when the Buddha's talking about feelings, he's not talking about just whatever happens to come and go—because feelings not of the flesh have to be produced. You have to give rise to them. If you don't give rise to them, they don't happen. If you don't maintain them, they don't stay.

Pain not of the flesh, for instance, has to do with your desire to get the mind to be trained in concentration and to gain awakening. As the Buddha says, when you realize that you can't get the mind to stay equanimous in the face of negative things, you should regard it as an instance of bad fortune. "This doesn't bode well for me," you should say to yourself. "I can't bring my mind in line with the Buddha's teachings." The feeling that goes along with that thought is painful. It's not a physical feeling necessarily, but there is a mental pain that goes along with it: "Why can't I get my mind to settle down?"

The Buddha actually encourages that kind of thinking. All too often we hear that you shouldn't exert yourself too hard in the meditation, or "Don't set up any

goals for yourself." Those are the kinds of instructions that can be appropriate for a weekend retreat when people tend to put themselves in a pressure cooker, thinking about the fact that they could have gone down to the beach instead for the weekend, but here they are on a meditation retreat. So they want something to show for it: stream entry at least. Of course, when you're in that frame of mind, you place impossible demands on yourself and make yourself miserable. So in cases like that, you should be encouraged to drop any idea of goals and just be with the present.

But when you're thinking of the practice as a lifetime endeavor, you've got to have goals and you've got to have a sense of where you want to go. And one way of motivating yourself is to remind yourself that you do want to get to the goal. Even though it's painful to realize you're not there yet, there's no way you'll work toward the goal without fostering that kind of pain—and then acting on it.

Another way of inducing pains not of the flesh is to ask, "When will I reach the awakening that those other noble ones have reached?" That's an instance of pain that's actually inspiring.

But you don't stop there. You use it as a motivation to develop pleasure not of the flesh, which the Buddha ranks on two levels. The first level is the level of pleasure that comes with the strong states of concentration, when the mind gets settled in with the breath. There's a sense of ease that comes with that, both physical and mental—sometimes even a sense of rapture, fullness, a very cool sense of well-being. This is something you have to work to give rise to. It doesn't just come willy-nilly. Moments of that kind of pleasure may happen randomly now and then, but as long as they're still just random, they can't serve as the path. You want to lock into them the same way a plane locks into a radar beam when it's going to land in an airport. You lock in with the breath and just stay, right on target. There's a sense of pleasure and solidity that comes with that, and the Buddha advises that you settle in and indulge in that sense of pleasure.

Another thing you hear all too often is that you shouldn't let yourself get attached to concentration practice or attached to the pleasure of concentration. But actually that pleasure is something you *should* get attached to, again as motivation to develop it further. Eventually you can wean yourself away from that attachment, but in the beginning you need that kind of attachment to pry yourself away from attachments that are less skillful. You have to get skilled at giving rise to it so that you have something better to hold onto than the old, run-of-the-mill sensual pleasures that rule your life otherwise.

Right here is where you can see how pleasures and pains not of the flesh are not things you simply watch as they come or go willy-nilly. You give rise to them when necessary, because you've got to maintain this kind of pain to motivate yourself to give rise to this kind of pleasure. As with all skillful states: If they're

not there, you try to give rise to them. When they are there, you try to develop them.

Ultimately, you want to develop them to a level the Buddha calls pleasure more not-of-the-flesh than not of the flesh. That's the pleasure that comes when you reflect on the fact that you've attained awakening. In other words, you've reached the goal, or at the very least, you've had your first genuine taste of the goal.

Similarly with equanimity: Equanimity not of the flesh is the equanimity that comes with the fourth jhana and then develops up through the higher formless states. This, too, is something you've got to induce. You don't just sit there and wait for it to hit you upside the head. You get the mind to settle in with the breath, and this breath gets more and more refined as the energy in the body gets more and more connected, to the point where the in-and-out breathing stops—not because you've stifled it, but because it's no longer needed. Sometimes when things settle in, everything seems automatic and simply connects, and the breath stops on its own. But if it doesn't, there are things you can work with to get the breath headed in that direction.

Think of all the energy channels in the body connecting up with one another so that they nourish one another. If one part of the body has a little bit of excess energy, you allow it to feed other parts of the body that seem to be lacking in energy. When all these multiple connections inside get opened up to the pores of the skin so that the energy suffuses everywhere in the body, that's when you can let the in-and-out breath grow more and more calm because you don't really need it that much. You ultimately get to the point where you don't need it at all. This is where the mind gets solid and really still. That's equanimity not of the flesh. And again, it has to be induced.

As for the second level of equanimity—more not-of-the-flesh than not of the flesh—that refers to the equanimity you feel after you've attained awakening. You reflect on the fact that your mind is now free from defilement. And there's a sense of great peace.

It's only on that level—the level more not-of-the-flesh than not of the flesh—that pleasure and equanimity don't have to be induced. But on the way there, feelings of pleasure and equanimity not of the flesh have to be induced and maintained as best you can.

But this fits in with everything else the Buddha says on mindfulness. When he talks about mindfulness as a governing principle, this is what he means. If anything unskillful arises in the mind, the duty of mindfulness is to try to figure out how to get rid of it. When something skillful has developed, you try to remember to keep it going and nurture it so that it develops further. That's how

mindfulness governs the other factors of the path.

In other words, it looks at what's there in the mind and it remembers, from what you've done or heard in the past, what to do with that particular state of mind. If the mind doesn't want to settle down, what have you learned about dealing with an obstreperous mind?—either from what you've heard, or what you've read, or what you've done on your own in your practice. When things are going well, how do you remember to keep them well-balanced? That's a much more delicate proposition, because if you think too much about keeping things balanced, they begin to get wobbly. But you can survey the situation when things seem to be going well and you try to develop a sense of how you can maintain them, to keep them going. Remember that this is what you want to do when things are going well. You remember to keep them going.

And try to detect any ways that you can make the concentration more solid, the sense of well-being more subtle. It's not just a matter of simply being with whatever happens to arise or whatever happens to pass away. There are certain things, skillful states of mind, that you want to *make* arise, and you want to prevent them from passing away. As for unskillful states of mind, you want to remember to try to prevent them from arising. If they *are* there, you try to remember how to get them to pass away as quickly as you can.

That's mindfulness as a governing principle. And when the Buddha lists feelings not of the flesh under feelings as a frame of reference, that's just an illustration of this very point—because these things don't just come or just go, and you're not here just to watch them come or go. You're here to induce them and to keep them going, to maintain them so that they develop and grow, so that ultimately you can free yourself from pains not of the flesh, and experience nothing but the pleasure and equanimity not of the flesh.

So remember that that's where we're headed.

Bodies & Minds Outside

October 21, 2013

When describing the various ways of developing or establishing mindfulness, the Buddha talks about being focused on the body in and of itself, internally, externally, or both. And the same with feelings, mind, and mental qualities: You can focus on them either internally, externally, or both. Internally, it's pretty obvious what he's talking about: your own experience of body, feelings, and so forth. But what about externally? If you believe that mindfulness means simply being aware, how are you going to watch other people's feelings or mind states? Actually, though, mindfulness means keeping something in mind. And that means that you keep in mind that other people are experiencing their bodies, feelings, and mind states as well. This then becomes a very useful instruction in that it reminds you to compare what you've got with what other people have, and there are lots of different ways you can benefit from this kind of contemplation.

For instance, with the body: You reflect that your body is made out of the four properties. And it's the same with other people's bodies. I remember when I was young, I used to think I had a special relationship to my body. We were on good terms. I took care of it and I thought it would be nice to me in return. But as you get older, you realize that your body is there not because it wants to be, or because it's happy to be there. After all, it's just made out of the food you ate. You took it over. When it's going to do its body thing, it's just going to do its body thing. No matter how well you care for it, no matter how wonderful the food or how good your exercise program, your body is going to age. It's going to grow ill and it's going to die, just like everyone else's. This helps give you a realistic check on your relationship to your body, or what you can expect out of it.

But it also helps to reflect that if you think about where you'd like to be reborn, there's going to be another body. And it's going to have the same problems that this one does. No matter how good things get—say, you decide you want to be a bodhisattva—you have to come back and be born again and again and again, and you have to eat again and again, and you have to find clothing and shelter, all of which places a huge burden on other people and other beings. So it gets you thinking: Maybe the best thing would be to go to a formless realm. Okay, but in the formless realms—if you get there—it's very difficult to do

any kind of contemplation. So you've got to come back to the form realm again, and to the problems of having a body again. The best thing is to get out.

So this kind of reflection is both a good equalizer and a good inducement to samvega.

As for your body image, it's good to equalize that, too. Try that reflection on the 32 parts of the body to think of what you've got. The Buddha always advises that you start with your own body first, and then think about other people's bodies: the same 32 parts, and more. The 32 parts are just for starters. You can ask yourself, which one of those parts would you like to put up here on the altar? Which one would you like to see on a plate? Which one, if it's liquid, would you like to bathe in? Well, none of them. Everybody else's is the same. If you have an especially high regard for how you look, think about what's inside. If you have a low regard for how you look—and we have a lot of that in our culture because of the unrealistic body images that we see in the media—it's good to realize that with all those beautiful bodies, all you have to do is just take off the skin, and you wouldn't be able to look at them. So this reflection is a good equalizer.

I was talking to some Dhamma magazine editors the other day and mentioning that if you have a low body image or negative body image, this kind of analysis can actually be really good for you in that it reminds you that everybody else has just the same parts you have. Those editors had never heard the idea before, which tells you a lot about American Dhamma.

So reflection on bodies inside and out is meant to be an equalizer and to give you a sense of samvega. Not to say that the body is bad—just that it's not the sort of thing you want if you're looking for something beautiful. However, it *is* something to look for if you want a tool to practice with. After all, when you're sitting in meditation, what's doing the sitting? The body. When you focus on the breath, you're focusing on the body. When you practice jhana, you fill the body with pleasure and rapture so that you can settle down comfortably in it. When you do walking meditation, you've got to use your body. To listen to the Dhamma, you need the ears. So you realize that the best use for this body is to practice the Dhamma. If you ever aspire to another lifetime, you want a body that's able to practice the Dhamma. But to keep these priorities clear, you have to strip away any idea that the body's worth lies in looking good. Realize that that's a major distraction, and contemplate hard to counteract any tendencies in the mind that tell you otherwise. Otherwise, they'll sneak in and take over.

That's the body.

As for feelings, you reflect on the fact that you have feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain. You love pleasure and you hate pain. Then you reflect on the fact that other people have the same pleasures and pains. Here

again, the reflection acts as an equalizer and as a spur to samvega. On the one hand, it helps to equalize your sense of compassion and goodwill. You realize that if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. You can't say, "Excuse me, this is my happiness, and so you'll just have to let me continue enjoying it because it's so special." They'll say, "This is my suffering. It's special, too. I don't want it." This is an equalizer in that it makes you realize that your happiness forces you to take other people's happiness into account.

But the same reflection can be used to induce samvega. You realize that wherever you're going to be reborn, there's going to be pleasure, there's going to be pain. There are heavens where it's exclusively pleasant, but then when you leave those heavens, you come back down to pain. And sometimes it's really hard. The higher you go, the harder you fall. I've told you about some of Ajaan Fuang's students who were extremely difficult people. Nothing was ever good enough for them. And his comment was that they were devas in their previous lifetimes. They still hadn't adjusted to the fact that they were human beings again.

Being a deva and having all that pleasure is no guarantee that it's going last forever. Sometimes it makes it harder to come back. So again you can take this reflection as motivation to practice really seriously, to see if you can go beyond that.

As for mind states, they entail the same sort of reflection. On the one hand, it's an equalizer. Whatever you're experiencing in your mind, other people are experiencing the same sorts of things. And what they're experiencing, you've experienced before. This can help with compassion and empathetic joy. There's that passage where the Buddha talks about seeing people who are extremely wealthy and realizing you've been there before. When you see people who are extremely poor or ill, you've been there before as well. This helps to equalize things to counteract resentment or pride.

But this reflection can equalize things in another way. You can think about people who are faced with the same mental problems that you have: the mind when it's depressed, the mind when it's scattered. All the great meditators of the past and the present have had just exactly the same kinds of problem. Yet they were able to get past them.

In the same way, when you're sitting with pain, realize that other people have sat with pain, too, and yet they were able to keep sitting with it. What did they have that you don't have? They had persistence. Where did they get that? It wasn't that they were born with it. They developed it. You can develop it, too. This way, the reflection on other people's minds can lift you up. When you hear about people sitting long hours of meditation, you say, "Why can't I try that, too?"

When you run into pain, you have to realize they ran into the same pain. What did they do? They must've done something. The fact that someone has set an example like this opens your mind to possibilities that you wouldn't have thought of before. As the Buddha said, without him as our admirable friend, we wouldn't have thought of the path. But the fact that he's there as an example, and the noble disciples are there as examples, opens our minds to the possibility that maybe we can follow the path as well. This kind of equalizing helps to inspire you to greater heights.

Reflection on other people's mind states is also a good reflection for fairness. When you see other people acting on their unskillful mind states, it gives you a chance to see what you look like when you act on yours. It's not a pretty sight. For example, we all have a tendency to want to straighten other people out. We want this person to be that way and that person to be this way. But when other people try to straighten you out, how do you feel? The Thais call this putting other people's heart in your heart, and your heart in theirs: in other words, realizing that what you feel is what other people feel. If you ever want to straighten anything out, well, you've got your heart here that needs straightening out first.

And so focus right here—because this is where you really can do the work.

This is where all this reflection on bodies and feelings and mind states outside has to come back to: to what you're doing with *your* body, *your* feelings, and *your* mind states. These are the things you're responsible for. But by casting your thoughts out in that wide net for a while, you get some perspective on what you're doing right here. If you do it skillfully, it can really be an aid in the practice.

So don't neglect this part of the meditation, because it really can help your motivation, it can help you develop the right attitudes, and help you think of possibilities you may not have thought of before.

Strengthening Concentration

January 5, 2012

In English, when we talk about somebody being single-minded, the implication is that the person is very focused on one single purpose, or one single aim. It's a quality of the will. And that's a very relevant way of thinking about concentration. It's not only that you should have a single object on which you're focused at the moment, but your purpose should be single as well. You're going to stay right here and not let anything else distract you.

This means that concentration is a quality both of awareness and of the will. To strengthen it, you have to think about the qualities that strengthen your will. And it turns out that they're the same as the qualities that strengthen your mindfulness. The first quality is virtue: You observe the precepts as practice in making promises to yourself that you then try to keep. You promise yourself that you're not going to kill anything, not even a little insects. Not even termites. No stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. You set these principles up as promises and then try to keep to them.

You learn things about yourself in the process. One is that you learn the areas where you have difficulty. And two, you've got to learn how to negotiate with your conflicting intentions.

This is where the second quality comes in, which is having right view: realizing why this is important, why you want to be doing this.

All too often, we think of developing our willpower simply as kind of a brute force. But the force of willpower can last only for so long on its own. It needs help. The main way you can help it is through adjusting your understanding. For instance, with the precepts, you begin to see that life actually does get better, things get a lot easier, when you're holding to the precepts. Once you really perceive that you're making things easier for yourself, it changes the equation. The precepts are not such a battle. What you've done is that you've changed your perception, changed your understanding, in a way that enables you to strategize more effectively in overcoming resistance in the mind.

The same thing applies with concentration. The Buddha talks about times when you're trying to focus on the breath, and the mind says: "Oh, I'm not willing to settle down." He calls it having a fever in the body or a fever in the mind, an unwillingness to stay settled. He doesn't recommend just bulldozing

through it. Instead, he says to switch over to something you find inspiring.

This is where an important adjunct to focusing on the breath, focusing on the body, is the set of standard recollections, because they help you get your views straightened out. And they help strengthen your motivation for why you're here.

Ajaan Lee talks about how important it is to develop a sense of samvega if you're going to get the mind really settled down. You can contemplate the parts of the body, and that's not necessarily just for the issue of lust. It's for whatever the form of your attachment to this physical lump here: pride, possessiveness, shame, whatever. If you really look into the body, what do you actually have there? All kinds of things you wouldn't want to associate with. If your stomach was sitting on a chair next to you at the dinner table, you wouldn't want to have a conversation. You'd be grossed out. Your lungs and all the other parts: They're not the kind of thing that you would like to socialize with, and yet so much of our life, so much of our energy is devoted to keeping the body healthy, keeping it comfortable—and those are just the reasonable things we do with the body. On top of that, there are other things. We get totally obsessed with its looks, totally obsessed with how we're going to keep it as young and attractive as possible.

When you can learn how to see the futility of the whole thing, you develop a sense of samvega, a sense of dismay. And it's very chastening. Sometimes that sense of being chastened is enough to bring the mind squarely into the present moment. You look at the various activities in life, and they begin to seem very futile. You begin to see the importance of getting the mind trained so that it doesn't have to depend on the body, doesn't have to depend on things outside for its happiness. You begin to see that the discovery of the Dhamma, the discovery of something that really is deathless inside, is something of genuine worth. It's your only hope for any kind of genuine happiness.

Learn how to motivate yourself in this way, or in whatever way that works. After all, this is something that's really very individual. Sometimes you read the different ajaans talking about the kind of contemplation that brought their minds down to concentration, and it just seems to roll off your back. It's not that grabbing, not that compelling. You have to look into your own mind to see what is compelling in your case. How do you actually motivate yourself? Sometimes it's through contemplation of death. Sometimes it's when you think of something more positively inspiring, like the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha.

There are a whole host of other ways of developing strategies for motivating yourself. I've been reading recently about how famous writers motivated themselves to write. Anthony Trollope, for example, made a vow to himself that he would write x number of words every day. And he wouldn't leave his writing

room until he had finished that amount. That meant, of course, that on some days he was writing garbage. But at least he was churning out a certain amount, and he got it so that, after a while, it wasn't garbage. Raymond Chandler had a different approach. He would give himself four hours every day to write. And if he wasn't writing, he wouldn't do anything else. He would just sit there doing nothing. And pretty soon the boredom would bring up something. He had found that if he allowed himself to read, or putter around during the four hours, then nothing would come. But if the choice was simply nothing or writing, pretty soon he was writing.

So different people have different techniques, different approaches for getting themselves going. And a large part of learning how to understand yourself, and how to deal with your defilements, lies in figuring out what approach works for you, what strategies get you more motivated to practice. You might try Trollope's approach, and just put in the hours on the cushion or the meditation track every day without demanding that they have to be good hours all the time. Or you can apply Chandler's approach and put yourself in an empty room with nothing else to do but meditate, to see if the boredom gets you back on the cushion. As the Buddha said, one of the measures of your wisdom and discernment is how you talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but you know get bad results, and how you talk yourself into doing things you don't like to do but you know do give good results. That's one of the main measures of your wisdom.

We tend to think of wisdom as something that comes at the very end of the practice: those short, pointed statements that come one per page, with wide margins, in books about wisdom. But to really develop wisdom, you have to develop a pragmatic approach to how you're going to get things to work in the mind and how you're going to get yourself motivated. This is why so many of the Thai ajaans were people of few words, but their words were sharp and pointed. They had honed things down to what works. What ways of thinking work? What ways of motivating themselves work? You go right for the jugular immediately, then you get down to work. That's an important part of wisdom and discernment. And it's something we all have to develop: learning the nuts and bolts of how to psyche ourselves out, to see which way of thinking, which application of right view, is going to really hit the mind so that it's motivated to practice.

This is an extremely important part of the practice. We can learn about the steps and all the different techniques in dealing with the breath, getting the mind to settle down with the breath, making the breath comfortable—and that's one of the important strategies right there: how you conceive of the breath, thinking of the breath as energy throughout the body. That's one set of skills and strategies

that help you to associate sitting in meditation with a sense of well-being, a sense of refreshment. And you have that to tap into when mind gets antsy and wants a quick fix of pleasure.

But there are lots of other issues that are going on in the mind as well, in terms of your motivation, of why you're here, why you're doing this. It's good to think about these issues, to be clear about them. Wisdom doesn't come from simply turning off the thinking in the mind and trying to observe, observe, observe, without any comment at all. That teaches you some lessons, but a lot of lessons never get learned that way. Insight practice is also a matter of exploration, experimentation, trying to figure things out. Why is it that greed, aversion, and delusion can still have power over the mind even when you've learned so much about their drawbacks? What's still their gratification? What can you do to wean yourself off that? Can you teach yourself new ways of feeding?

This is up to your own ingenuity. But that's how you strengthen your concentration. You come to stillness of mind by learning how to think about how important stillness of mind is and how much you want it. Without that sense of motivation, the single-mindedness of your concentration doesn't stay single for long.

So if you find that your concentration is weak, first look carefully at the actual topic you're focused on: You can adjust the breath, work with the breath. If that's not working, then look at the two factors that strengthen your mindfulness and willpower. One, look at your precepts and ask yourself: What's wrong with your precepts? What can you do to stick with them more effectively? And then, two, look at your motivation: Why are you doing this? How do you deal with the different committee members in the mind that are pulling you away?

As you experiment with these different approaches, you'll find the ones that work, so that your single-mindedness really stays single. It really does develop power. Without the strength of the concentration, your discernment won't be strong enough to deal with the defilements. The two of them have to work together: Your discernment strengthens your concentration; your concentration strengthens your discernment. Upasika Kee's image is of washing your hands. Your left hand has to wash your right, and your right hand washes your left. That's how they both get clean.

Focal Points

September 7, 2012

Try focusing on a new spot tonight—one that you haven't focused on before. Find some out-of-the-way spot in the body that's been neglected and place your attention there. Whether or not you feel the breath there isn't the issue. Just remind yourself that there is breath there, so whatever you feel there qualifies as breath. You don't have to make it move or do anything special. Just notice it. Aside from that, breathe in a comfortable way.

Or if you like, you can focus on two spots. There was an old retired schoolteacher I knew in Thailand who stayed at Wat Asokaram and had a reputation among the other lay meditators for being really quick in getting into concentration. Another old retired woman who was quite psychic—she could actually check out other people's minds—told me that by the time her own mind had settled down to the point where she could read other people's minds, the schoolteacher had already put her mind firmly into concentration and could just stay there for the entire session. As the schoolteacher told me, her trick was to focus on two spots at once. She described it as focusing on one spot in the middle of the brain and another spot down at the tailbone, and then thinking of a line connecting the two. She said that it was like hooking the electric lines leading from a light bulb to two poles of a battery. As soon as both ends were connected, the bulb would light up. That was her trick for getting concentrated really fast.

So you might try that and see if it works for you. You can choose those same two spots if you like, or any other two spots. The point here is that there's a lot of room for variation in the techniques.

You hear so many times, "Focus your attention on one spot." Yet here's another way of doing it—two spots. You also might look at how you conceive of the focusing, because our notion of focusing is affected so much by the way our eyes work. One of the ways we gain a sense of the three-dimensionality of space around us is in changing the focus of our eyes and seeing what comes into focus, what goes out of focus. Do that for a while and you have a sense of what's near and what's far.

So when you think about focusing on the breath, you may be bringing that habit inside. You may have a mental picture that you, the observer, are right here and the focal point is out there someplace else. So try to bring the focal point in

to right where the observer is. In other words, instead of having the focal point *ahead* of the lens, have it *right in* the lens and see what that does.

One of the points of experimenting with the meditation like this is to uncover some of the perceptions that underlie the way you're functioning. If you don't ask strange questions about what you're doing or try a few strange variations, you'll never see how strange your underlying assumptions are. For all this time, you thought, "It had to be that way." But it doesn't have to be that way. You can get better results by changing your assumptions.

For the time being, use this as a technique for seeing what works and what doesn't work in getting the mind into concentration. This is where playing with assumptions becomes not just a game, but something of value. You actually get beneficial results out of it. We're not just playing little mental exercises for the fun of it. It *can* be fun, but it's got a serious purpose: getting the mind to settle down and be steady. You try a variation. Stick with it for a while. See what it does.

It's like experimenting with a recipe. After years and years of following Julia Child, you tell yourself, "Wait a minute. Let's change the seasonings. Let's change the proportions. Why does it have to be the way she says it is?" And in some cases, you'll find there was a good reason for what's in her recipe. In other cases, well, no. It simply had to do with her personal taste. But you have your personal taste and, after all—remember that image of the cook? You're trying to find something that pleases you as you're sitting here meditating: something that keeps you engaged, that engages your imagination and calls a few things into question. So play with the breath as you please.

Many people have trouble staying with the breath or getting in touch with the breath energies in the body because their conception of how their body works is determined by what they're told about how it works: what other people can observe; what a doctor says or what a machine can measure about their breath from the outside. But when you're meditating, you're not looking at the body from outside. You're experiencing it from within, and that means throwing out a lot of your old outside preconceptions, particularly the assumptions that draw on materialism: the idea that you're primarily matter, and only secondarily conscious. If you function totally in a materialistic universe, it's going to make you suffer. And yet when we come to meditation, even though part of us realizes that materialism is a miserable way of thinking, we still carry a lot of materialistic assumptions into the mind. So turn things around. Awareness comes first, the material world later. You're experiencing things from within, and it's exclusively your territory.

You're the expert in here. There's an old Peanuts comic strip where Linus comes up to Lucy and touches her and says, "See how cold my hands are?" She

says, “Brrr. Yes, they’re cold. But how do you know that they’re cold when you’re inside them?” Well, you actually know better than anybody else how your body feels from within. In fact, that’s something nobody else can know. You’re the only one who can. And so it’s up to you to explore. Try to give this your full attention. Use some ingenuity and see what happens.

If you don’t like focusing on one spot or two spots, or a line between two spots, think of yourself as focusing on every spot in the body. When you breathe in, every cell is breathing in and breathing out. If you’re using *buddho,* every little point in your awareness is shouting, *“buddho, buddho.”* Everything becomes a focal spot. They’re all equally there. You’re equally present to every spot. Try that and see if it gets you firmly into the present moment.

This is one of the reasons why there are so many different variations on breath meditation even just in the Forest Tradition, to say nothing of the methods outside of the tradition. The ajaans have taught many different types of meditation because each of them was out in the forest alone for long periods of time, dealing with his own breath, dealing with his own mind. When things didn’t work, to whom could they go? They had to depend on their own ingenuity and their own powers of observation. This is why Ajaan Fuang used these words over and over and over again, “Be observant. Use your ingenuity. Be observant again. Learn to question your assumptions.”

I remember when I first went to Thailand, it was very typical for Westerners to generalize about the Thais, thinking that Thais were very conformist and all thought alike. But I actually found that Thai people were much more individualistic in their views of the world—how things worked—than most of the Americans I knew. Part of this, of course, was because they had less of a standardized formal education. Most of them learned how to read, how to write, how to do arithmetic, and that was it. So they spent the rest of their lives engaging with the world in their own ways, and each person would come up with his or her own way of conceiving that engagement. It was really interesting talking to them, especially the older generation, and getting their ideas about how things worked. Sometimes their ideas were off the mark as far as areas where it didn’t really affect their daily lives, but if something affected their daily lives directly, they were extremely observant and extremely ingenious. That’s how they survived.

The same principle applies to the meditation. It’s a quality we should all develop if we want to survive as meditators. When you’re told something, try it out for a while. If it works, stick with it. If it doesn’t work, well, flip it around a little bit. Turn it inside out. Try the opposite. Try to conceive of what the “opposite” might be. Maybe your conception of the opposite is a little narrow. Recall those questions that were posed to the Buddha, the hot questions of the

day: Is the cosmos eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Other people had come up with all sorts of responses to the questions, taking one side or the other, but the Buddha had a new response, which was that the questions themselves were not even worth asking. It blew their minds.

Well, there's a lot in meditation where you have to learn how to blow your own mind because, after all, when you come to the truths and the realizations that are going to give you release, they deal with things that have been right here in front of you and yet you haven't seen them. That's because they lie outside your normal frame of thinking. If you just simply plod through the instructions with blinders on your eyes, you're never going to come across anything unexpected. So learn to play with things. Learn to experiment. Some of the experiments won't work, but if they don't, just throw them away. If they do work, you've found something that's really good—something that will help you see and understand things in a new, a more useful way. That's when you know your meditation is working. That's how it progresses.

Blowing Bubbles

April 11, 2013

One of the first instructions you get in practicing concentration is that if you notice you've wandered away from the breath, try to come back as quickly as possible. And just because it's a basic instruction early on doesn't mean that it's something to forget later on in the practice. It really is important because you not only strengthen your concentration, but you also gain insight into your thoughts as you try to drop them.

Some people think that you have to stay with a thought for a long time, watch it, and analyze it, to really understand it, but that's not always the case. You learn about the process of thinking by dropping it, because in the course of dropping it you see what little strings are left. It's like cutting a lotus stem. You pull one part away from the other part, but there are very fine strands connecting the two parts for a while. In the same way, there are little strands in your thoughts that will try to hold you there. As you try to cut them, they complain. That's when you begin to understand, "This is what made that thought so interesting or attractive." You don't have to stay with the thought to understand the process of why the mind is getting involved with these things. You actually learn a lot by cutting things away as quickly as possible.

When the mind is churning out thoughts, it's like a child playing with soap bubbles. You blow the bubbles and they float away, and you want to get into the soap bubble and float away with it because the bubble contains all these interesting swirling patterns of color. You want to see how far you can go with it. Yet all of the bubbles burst. When some of them burst, it's not all that bad, because they burst low to the ground over a patch of grass. But some of them really can give you a lot of trouble. They burst high up in the air over a patch of thorns, and there you are: plunked down hard on the thorns.

So you want to understand this process of bubble-blowing without getting *into* the bubbles. You're looking *at* the process, and all the Buddha's ways of dealing with distracting thoughts give you insight into these processes.

The first one is simply that if you notice you've picked up an unskillful object, you drop it. Replace it with a more skillful one. This emphasizes the point that you really do have a choice. You're not stuck with whatever comes up in the mind.

Lots of different things could come up, and you learn to choose the things that are most skillful. That's an important lesson in kamma right there. There are lots of different potentials that could come up at any moment, and you have the ability to choose which ones you're going to emphasize. So that's an insight: Just because a thought has come into the mind doesn't mean that you have to live with it; you can pull out immediately.

The second technique is to think about the consequences of unskillful thinking. You find that something keeps coming back again and again and again even when you try to drop it. So you ask yourself, "Where is this going to lead me? If I stayed with it for a long period of time, what would I end up doing?" You think about the thought in whatever ways you can that make you realize you don't want to go with it; it's a waste of time. One of my favorite techniques is to ask yourself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to see it?" But it goes deeper than that. If you were to think about lust for days on end, where would it take you? If you think about anger for days on end, where is it going to take you? Nowhere good. So why get involved with it at all? You learn to step back and realize that your thoughts really do have consequences. You don't want to encourage them just because they're fun to be with for a while. The consequences can be really bad. That's another insight you get into kamma.

The technique where you simply ignore them: The thoughts can be chattering away, but you don't have to go chattering with them. You don't even have to try to shut them up. This gives you some insight into the committee of the mind, realizing there are lots of different selves and lots of different becomings—lots of different bubbles are being blown all the time. And again, just because something is there, you don't have to go with it. You don't have to get involved. Sometimes the thought will try to get you involved simply by being so outrageous that you try to stop it—and it's got you. You're already sucked into the bubble. So instead, you stay on the outside.

The technique of relaxing a thought formation: When you get sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to realize that when a thought arises in the mind there's going to be a little marker in the body, a spot of tension that you use to remind yourself, "Okay, this is the thought I'm going to stay with." When you notice that a thought comes in, but there's a pattern of tension—say, in your arm, your shoulder, or some place in your stomach—if you see that they arise together, try to dissolve that pattern of tension with the breath. And the thought will go away because it has nothing to act as its foothold.

This gives you some insight into the way things happening in the body are connected with things happening in the mind. In fact, the more quickly you see this connection, the more quickly you get to the point where there's just a little stirring in your range of awareness—and it's hard to say whether it's mental or

physical—but the mind makes a decision: "Okay, this is a thought about x." And then you go riding with the thought. That happens fairly early on in the process, and the more quickly you can drop the thought, the more clearly you'll see that stage in the process. So, as soon as there's any kind of stirring, you just breathe right through it, breathe right through it, and that prevents a lot of these thoughts from arising.

The Buddha's fifth technique is where, when nothing else works, you put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, clench your teeth, and just tell yourself, "I'll crush my mind with my mind." In other words, "I won't let that thought come up." Or you can repeat a meditation word very quickly —*buddho,buddho,buddho*—to jam the airways. This, of all the methods, uses the least discernment. But it teaches you an important lesson, which is that as your meditation progresses, it's not the case that you'll never need basic methods like this ever again. Just because one method seems gross or coarse, it's not the case that once you've gone to the sixth grade, you can forget what you learned in the first grade. Sometimes you have to bring your first grade lessons to use in the sixth grade.

It's the same with meditation. Sometimes the really gross techniques are the only ones that are going to work, and you can't say, "My mind is now getting more and more refined. I can't use those any more," or "It's a regression to use those techniques." Don't think in that way. Use whatever you've got to use. This is an important lesson in discernment as well.

So the ability to drop a thought very quickly is an important part of developing both concentration and discernment. A bubble gets blown and you watch it from the outside; you don't get inside it. You see the process of bubble-blowing. You begin to understand it. You stop it more and more quickly as you understand where it's coming from. Otherwise, you get engrossed in the colors of the bubbles and you want to get in—especially when the thoughts are about Dhamma. You can give yourself a whole Dhamma discourse while you're sitting here. In other words, you're not really looking at the breath. You're going off in some Dhamma bubble.

Regardless of what the content of the thought is, you want to become able to pull yourself out, because the real understanding is an understanding of the process—how these things happen. The content is pretty irrelevant. It's in seeing the process that you actually gain discernment. And again, the best way to see the process is to try to stop it as quickly as you can. Get back to the breath. You'd be surprised what you learn by simply doing that.

Getting Untangled from Thorns

May 26, 2013

As we meditate, we try to stay with the body because otherwise we're swimming around in our thoughts. Our thoughts are like many different currents in a river or an ocean. This current goes north; that current goes south. This other current spins around, and it spins *you* around so that you begin to lose track of what's north or south. In other words, it's easy to lose your sense of what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and what's not. You can't regain it until you can pull back and observe these things a little bit from the outside. In fact, the more you can observe them from the outside, the better.

So staying with the body gives you an anchor. It gives you a spot on which you can stand. It's like an island. The island doesn't flow down the river. It doesn't get pushed around by the currents of the ocean. And that way, you begin to see: "Oh, here's a current coming in from that direction; here's a current coming in from this direction." You can recognize the directions, but as you stand on the island you don't have to flow along with the currents.

Another reason for staying with the body, staying with the breath, is that it really does anchor you in the present moment. When you're with the breath, you *know* you're in the present. And often, it acts as a good mirror of what's going on in the mind. Sometimes there are subtle currents that you otherwise wouldn't notice, but because they have an effect on the subtle aspects of the breath energy, you can detect that they're there.

So there are a lot of good reasons for wanting to stay with the body. It helps you observe thoughts arise, pass away, and it gives you something solid to hold onto. As thoughts begin to subside, you're not lost. You're right here where everything important is happening. The issue, of course, is that before your thoughts begin to subside you have to get through a tangle. To change the analogy, they're like lots of different thorny bushes. You get past one and find that you're snagged on it. You have to go back and undo whatever's been snagging you.

I was up on the North Rim this last week, and there are a lot of little locust bushes with lots of long thorns. As I was hiking through the forest, my old blanket was constantly getting caught. I'd have to stop, go back, and very carefully pull out that thorn, pull out this thorn. I found that in doing that, I

learned a lot about thorns, and I learned a lot about the weave in my blanket. It's the same in dealing with distracting thoughts. We want to get past them; we'd rather not have to deal with them. Often we're very impatient. "When will I get past this?" And sometimes we do get past a particular thought, but then it comes back again.

It's very easy to get discouraged. But you've got to look at the distractions as opportunities to gain understanding, to gain discernment, to pull back and see what's caught and where and why. You gain a lot of insights into your own mind this way. So even though you're trying to get past your thoughts, still it requires patience and a willingness to learn—often the very lessons you *don't* want to learn about yourself. Some people avoid this by saying, "Well, I'll just accept whatever comes, whatever goes, and not worry about trying to get the thoughts to settle down." But you're never really going to understand them that way. You can observe a little bit, little flashes of things as they go past. To really understand them, though, you have to resist them and learn how not to get discouraged when they overcome your resistance, but just simply ask yourself, "Okay, where was the weak link in my resistance here?"

So we have to use a combination of patience and persistence with these thoughts, in the same way that getting my blanket untangled from the thorns required patience and persistence. If I were in too much of a hurry, the blanket would rip. If I gave up and just left the blanket there, then I'd be left without a blanket, and it was cold up there. I needed a blanket, so I needed to untangle it—carefully.

In the same way, we need our mind to be functioning well, so we have to untangle it carefully. Always hold in mind the fact that this is a long-term project we're working on here, and a very delicate one. You can't just rush through things. It's also especially important not to get discouraged when you've worked through something and then find it coming back again. It's not a sign that you've failed, simply that you learned one lesson, but there are other lessons you have to learn as well.

Most of the problems we have in our lives come from impatience. We're a very impatient nation, a very impatient generation. But the impatience often gets us into trouble. Sometimes wanting to do something quickly does give rise to quick results, and sometimes it just messes things up. I understand there's an Internet company that has as one of its slogans: Move Fast and Break Things. Well, that's not what we're doing with the meditation. We're not trying to break anything; we're trying to understand things. And that requires untangling them, sometimes one thread at a time.

When a particular instance of anger comes up, sometimes many, many threads are caught. Or they catch you. Many, many thorns catch you in your

blanket. And when you've learned about one thorn, that doesn't mean you've solved the problem. When you come back and the other thorns get you, it doesn't mean that removing that first thorn was a failure. It was just one step in a very complicated process.

It's the same with lust. You find that there are many layers to lust: your attraction to a particular image, to particular details in what you see, your fantasy narratives, your role in the narratives, your attraction just to the feeling of having lust. Then there are all the little details. That's why the Buddha said, when he was describing restraint, that you notice the details or the themes and variations—the general themes and the little, tiny things that can set you off. It's not that you don't look at people or anything at all, but simply that you learn how to notice: What *are* the things that attract you? That's where you learn some really important lessons about the power of perception.

Certain perceptions have certain ideas associated with them, and it's all pretty arbitrary. As the Buddha said, it's fabricated. You want to see these fabrications in action because that's where ignorance lies—the big root that we're trying to dig out here. If you wonder where the ignorance is right now, look for where your mind is fabricating something. And perception's a very useful fabrication to focus on. After all, concentration itself is what the Buddha calls a "perception attainment." You have to have a certain mental image of the breath in order to be able to focus on the sensation of the breath—and to *see it* as a breath sensation.

Many people have trouble right here. They say, "I'm trying to focus on my breath, but I just keep coming back to being with the body." Well, what *is* the immediate sensation of the body but breath energy? It's a question of perception, seeing it that way. Then you begin to realize, "Okay, you can see it that way." Or you could see it in other ways, but the question is, which perception is most useful. Realize that you have the choice. There are lots of different ways you can perceive things.

It's like going to another country that has a different system of medicine. Their whole analysis of diseases: the different categories of diseases, the way they've organized them and the way they treat them… There's a whole different body of perceptions that they apply to diseases, even though they're talking about many of the same things that happen to us here in America. There are a few variations, some different diseases that we don't have here, yet many of the basic diseases are pretty much the same. But their way of categorizing them, their way of treating them, their way of understanding why they're there in the body is very different. Instead of simply dismissing their approach as something strange, you learn from it. Sometimes it can treat diseases in ways that are more direct and effective than anything you've known here. You realize, "Okay, there is that angle from which I could look at things, and it works."

Once you get a sense of the power of perception in your concentration, then it's a lot easier to see it at work in your thoughts: how one particular perception can ignite anger and another perception can ignite lust or fear, greed or envy. You begin to realize how arbitrary these things are. That in itself is very liberating. So, if you find that your blanket is snagged on the thorns, just stop and very carefully take things apart one thorn at a time. Have the patience so you don't rip your blanket, but the persistence so that you actually get it free.

An important part of the skill in the meditation is just that: knowing how to balance these things. This is one of the main ways that we develop discernment in the practice. If the practice were simply a matter of going to a far extreme, whatever that extreme may be, it wouldn't require much thought or discernment. It would require just a lot of pushing. As the Buddha said, his path is a middle path, and it's "middle" in lots of different ways. You have to figure out how much food is enough and how much food is too much if you're trying to practice. How much sleep is enough; how much sleep is too much? How much pressure to put on your object of meditation: If you don't put any pressure at all, you'll be flying away. You put too much pressure, and things begin to clamp down, you don't feel comfortable here. How much thinking is necessary? How much thinking is too much?

As you engage in these issues, you find that you really do develop your powers of discernment. You develop sensitivity to what's working and what's not, what's skillful and what's not. This is where the discernment becomes your own because, after all, it is your stress, it is your suffering that you're dealing with, along with the fact that you're causing it and that these are things you experience from within. You can read about these things and have all kinds of theories and have everything all correct so that you can explain it to other people. But if you don't actually see it happening within your present awareness, it's just perceptions. And even correct perceptions can hide things if your gaze is not all-around.

So again, this is one of the reasons why we stay here with the body. You start by experiencing the body from within. You don't worry about how other people might explain what you're sensing here. You ask yourself, "How am I sensing this?" We use the Buddha's categories of breath energy, earth, water, and fire to help give ourselves a vocabulary for getting a sense of what's going on here. Then you begin to see your thoughts as they have an impact on the body and on your feelings.

And as you get sensitive right here, you get more and more sensitive to where there's stress and where there's no stress, what kind of fabrication leads to more stress, what kind of fabrication leads to less stress. It's right here that everything becomes apparent—apparent in a way that may be unexpected, but really does

you a lot of good. So right here is where you belong.

Nurturing Your Inner Adult

September 10, 2013

When you start to meditate, make a quick survey of the body. See which of your joints are tense or tight, which of the muscles are tense or tight. Ask yourself, can you consciously relax them? Go down the arms. Then start at the back of the neck, go down the back, through the legs and feet. Start at the throat and go down the front of the torso. Or you can start in the hands and the feet and work up—whichever way of surveying things makes it easiest to relax. And try to relax into an erect posture.

Then as you breathe in and breathe out, try to keep that sense of relaxation going. Sometimes, when you're consciously breathing, you tend to tense up certain parts of the body to get the breath in, to push the breath out, and those patterns of tension get unpleasant after a while. They constrict the flow of the breath energy. So, think of everything being wide open. The energy can flow freely, and you just sit in the middle of this very pleasant energy field.

The edges don't have to be too clearly defined. In fact, sometimes you'll notice, as you're sitting here, that you can sense not only the energy in the body but the energy immediately around the body—an energy cocoon. You can begin to sense whether the energy surrounding your body is flowing freely or not. If it's not, just hold a picture in mind that heals the wounds in your energy field. You can take this as your foundation. It's an interesting and very pleasant foundation because there's the sense that you're floating here. Sometimes the body can get very light, but the quality of the mind is solid. And your awareness can go deep down into the body.

Having this as your foundation is very useful because it changes the balance of power in your mind. All too often when greed, aversion, delusion, fear, jealousy, any unpleasant or unskillful emotion comes into the mind, the way you breathe is going to change. In fact, the strength of the emotion is very frequently directly related to the extent to which that particular emotion has hijacked your breath energy. This is why, when you try to reason with that particular emotion, it's not going to listen to reason. You can have all your good reasons lined up and there's still a very strong sense that the power of the emotion is not going to listen, it's not going to be affected. That's because it has the power of the breath behind it.

One of the most effective ways of changing that balance of power is to be consciously aware of how you're breathing and to consciously smooth out, sort through, untangle any patterns of tension that would come up with the emotion. That way you can reclaim the breath, you can reclaim the power of the breath, so that it's on the side of the more alert, wiser, more mature members of your inner committee.

So if an emotion like fear or anxiety comes up, your first reaction should be: How is the breath?

Now, fear is not always an unskillful emotion. I've had many psychotherapists talk to me about this. They're curious about the fact that when the Buddha lists the roots of unskillful behavior, there's greed, aversion, delusion —or passion, aversion, and delusion. But where's the fear? For so many of them, fear is *the* unskillful emotion. Well, that's not necessarily the case. Actually, there are some good things to be afraid of. Be afraid that you're going to do things unskillfully. Be afraid you're going to act in harmful ways. Be afraid of wasting your time—the time that could be devoted to developing the mind. Those kinds of fears come under what the Buddha calls *ottappa:* compunction or fear of wrong-doing.

There's also the fear that comes with heedfulness: realizing that there are dangers out there and dangers in your own mind, and you've got to do something about them.

So fear isn't always unskillful. It's when the fear gets mixed up with greed, aversion, or delusion: That's when you've got a problem.

So first sort things out. Breathe through any of the patterns of tension that may come up with the fear, so you can weaken the sense that the fear is you or yours, or that it's telling you some deep message from your inner self. Change the way you breathe and you can undercut a lot of those misunderstandings.

As you stay with the more refreshing breath, more energizing or nourishing breath, try to get your inner adult involved. There's so much said about getting in touch with your inner child. I have a friend, a psychotherapist, who says the only people who have the right to talk about their inner child are pregnant women. We all have inner children, and they're all as misinformed as most children. The younger they are, the less reliable their perception of things. And yet we carry quite a few of them around. You want to bring your inner adult in to talk to those children—the inner adult who has a wider perspective, a perspective that's more mature.

To do this, back the inner adult up with good breath energy—refreshing, nourishing breath energy. Then you can sort things out: "Okay, what kind of fear is this? Where is the skillful element in the fear? Where is the unskillful element?

What unreasonable voices do I have to talk to? How can I change your perception of the situation?"

Remember those three types of fabrication. There's the breath, which is bodily fabrication; directed thought and evaluation—in other words, the way you talk to yourself about an issue—are verbal fabrications; and then there are perceptions and feelings, which are mental fabrications. Feelings here are not so much emotions. They're more feeling *tones:* pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Perceptions are the images that underlie the thoughts—the basic concepts, words, or images that you then turn into sentences, which then become verbal fabrication.

So when an emotion comes up, ask yourself, what's fabricating here? In particular, what kinds of perceptions are making it difficult to see the situation clearly? Often these fabrications and perceptions come from way back in your past. Some of the childish members on your committee have held onto these perceptions for a very long time. And one of the reasons they're so effective in holding on is that they keep these images in the shadows, so that they just flit past, like the subliminal messages that are broadcast on TV. They're there, but you're just barely aware of them. Yet they have their power precisely *because* you're just barely aware. They speak to a different part of the mind: the lizard brain, the part whose emotions are really raw.

If you find that you can't catch hold of what the perception is, try inserting alternative perceptions and see how the mind reacts. Try skillful perceptions. If the mind says, "I can't stand this, I can't take this, I'm afraid I'm going to die," well, are you really going to die from whatever that may be? Can you take it, can you stand it? You've put up with all kinds of things throughout life and survived. One of the most powerful elements of fear is your unwillingness to think of what you can do. You don't even want to think of the situation. But if you actually sit down and think about it patiently, step by step, you realize you can handle it. You might have to muddle through, and things might get difficult, but you can handle it. As you're thinking about this, it's helpful to have the breath coming in, going out really comfortably.

So learn how to use the breath, reclaim your breath. Get in touch with your inner adult and fortify the inner adult with what you now know about the breathing. That'll change the balance of power in the mind.

This morning we were talking about the faculties that the Buddha teaches: the faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The word for faculty, *indriya,* is related to Indra, the king of the gods, the dominant deva. The implication is that you want these faculties to be dominant in your mind, you want them to have power. They're your inner adults.

So you use the breath to put them on top, to keep them in charge, so you can have a good perspective on things. They'll help you gain a mature sense of which of your fears are really worth acting on and which ones are just totally irrational. That way, with a healthier inner committee like this, you find you can function a lot more effectively and cause a lot less suffering for yourself and the people around you.

The Bureaucracy of the Defilements

December 30, 2014

Years back there was a teacher in another Buddhist tradition who liked to talk a lot about the bureaucracy of the ego and how we had to throw off the shackles and tyranny of that bureaucracy. By that, he meant your ideas of right and wrong, of what you should and shouldn't do. His way of overcoming the tyranny of that bureaucracy was to deliberately do a lot of the things your mind said you shouldn't do. As you can imagine, he ended up doing a lot of harm to himself and to many other people, breaking the precepts and getting them to break the precepts as well.

The thing is that that's not the bureaucracy that you have to be afraid of, and that's not the tyranny you have to overthrow. You have another bureaucracy: the bureaucracy of your defilements—things like greed, aversion, and delusion, which cloud the mind and get in the way of genuine discernment.

Our mind is very complex. It's like a large organization, making all kinds of decisions all the time, and we have a tendency to delegate a lot of our decisions to our old habits. There are a lot of little bureaus in there that we haven't looked into for a long time. We gave them a job and they protect their jobs.

If you've ever studied the theory of bureaucracy, you know that each bureaucrat's main job is to protect his or her job. That is why bureaucrats don't like reform and don't like to have their work looked into. It's the same with your defilement bureaucrats: Their main desire is to hold onto their positions. But if you give them their way, you're the one who's going to suffer. They're not going to suffer. They're creating your kamma and it's all going to affect you. It's because you, as the boss, delegated things and you tend to get distracted—you're not even there in the head office all of the time—that you end up suffering from the decisions that these lower-level bureaucrats have made.

So, one of the main purposes of the meditation is to shine a light down into this bureaucracy, all of these lower-level functionaries inside your mind, the ones that allow greed, aversion, and delusion to have sway over the choices you're making, that you're barely *aware* that you're making. And as in dealing with any kind of bureaucracy, there's what you call the deep politics, the really inner-level workings of the various defilements that scratch one another's backs, help one another along. You've got to shine a light into there, or do a little bit of

investigative reporting, so that you can get the mind to settle down and really see what's going on.

The first thing you've got to do is to learn how to simplify your life in as many ways as possible, because one of the excuses for having a large bureaucracy where there are lots of dark corridors and hidden offices is because there's just so much work to be done that you've got to delegate things and need a lot of people to do it.

But when you simplify your life, you begin to realize that a lot of these bureaus aren't necessary. The Bureau of Wine Affairs. The Bureau of What To Do With All My Stuff Affairs. As you simplify things, you can see that these bureaus just churn out busywork. They have less of an excuse to be there. As you get more and more settled into the present moment—when, as the boss, you have fewer distractions—you stop running off to corporate meetings or corporate vacations. You're right there in the office, so you have the chance to walk around.

This is what we do when we settle into the breath. You start out, of course, with the in-and-out breath. But then you begin to realize that there are other subtle movements of energy in the different parts of the body and you begin to open up areas of awareness and areas of the body that used to get closed off because you were interested in something else. But now you're here. You can settle in and spread out to fill the body. You begin to see the movements of the mind a lot more clearly and a lot more quickly. A thought forms and you can see it in the beginning stages.

In the past, as you were just up there in the head office, you would hear about things only after the functionaries below you had sent things up through the channels, and, of course, when they sent things up, they tended to put their little spin on it. But now you can wander through the corridors, check who's doing what, and get a sense of what's necessary and what's not. You can actually see the decisions that are being made because you'll notice—and this is one of the reasons that we practice concentration and try to stay with one object like the breath—that once you decide that everything else that's irrelevant to your object is going to be dropped, you have to get quicker and quicker at sensing what's happening that you need to drop. Only then can you can let go of it in time.

You begin to see that there are certain stages. There's a little bit of stirring here or there in the mind and it's right at the boundary between the mind and the breath. Then a perception comes along and stamps a meaning on it, saying that "This is a thought about x." You realize you can go with that perception or not. If you're clear about what's happening, if you're watching the functionaries, then you can decide, "Do I really want to go with that?" And your decision is an informed one.

And it can be an effective one, too. Once you've become conscious of your choice and you've made up your mind that you don't want to go, it's a lot easier to say, "Nope, nope, nope, nope," down the line. That clears out a lot because you see that, with some of the defilements creating suffering, all you have to do is be aware of them and they wither away. Once you shine the light of your investigative reporting on them and you can see clearly that what they're doing is unnecessary and is causing a lot of suffering, they vanish.

Your other functionaries, though, know that no matter how much you shine a light on them, they have their ways of staying on, as they say in Thailand, "hugging their chairs." Those are the ones where you have to dig around and figure out, "Okay, what is it that's keeping this particular defilement from going away? Why does it keep coming back again and again and again? What's the appeal?"

As the Buddha said, these are the things that you have to look into. There are five steps in all, five steps for cleaning out the bureaucracy. First, notice when things come. Second, notice when they go. Third, notice, when they're coming, what's their appeal? Why does the mind go for these things? What felt need does it satisfy? And do you really feel that need anymore?

Because this is the problem: A lot of the times you assign a job to a certain functionary and then you forget about it entirely. These old habits: Some of them go back to your childhood, old ways of thinking, old ways of seeing the world, understanding how you can get pleasure out of something—because that is what these functionaries are all working for, their ideas of what happiness should be, what pleasure would be. You've got to look at the pleasure and say, "Okay, what's the price of this pleasure?" The functionaries don't care about the price of the pleasure, but as the boss, you've got to have your accounting books uppermost in your mind. Otherwise the firm will go bankrupt. This is where you begin to see the drawbacks of the pleasures advanced by the defilements, which is the fourth step in cleaning out the bureaucracy. You really see that the pleasure isn't worth the price, and you lose your taste for it.

And then the fifth step is seeing the escape. How do you escape from your delight in the allure? Part of the answer lies in seeing the drawbacks, and part lies in realizing that you have the choice—and that there is a better choice. You don't have to go with greed, aversion, and delusion anymore. You don't have to believe their PR. You learn how to see through all of their political maneuverings.

This is how you engage with the deep politics of the mind. It takes a lot of rooting out. It's not easy work, but once the mind is settled down and has a good strong sense of being stable and being *here,* fully here, filling the whole body with your awareness so that these lower-level functionaries are all exposed for what they're doing, then it's a lot easier to clean them out of the bureaucracy.

You find that having a bureaucracy doesn't always have to be a bad thing. A lot of decisions do have to be made. Even simply sitting here with the body, a lot of things are being decided in various levels of your awareness, and it's good that you don't have to take on every little detail. As long as everything is transparent —you've got wisdom in charge, you've got discernment in charge—you find that this bureaucracy, instead of continually churning out problems and churning out suffering, can actually become harmless. Blameless. Useful.

So it's the bureaucracy of your defilements, not the bureaucracy of the ego, that you have to watch out for. The problem lies, not in having a sense of right and wrong, but in having the wrong sense of right and wrong, one that's been skewed by the defilements. That's what you have to straighten out. Above all, as long as your life is very complex and your mind is taking on lots of tasks, it's going to be hard to deal with these things, hard to see these things. You want to simplify as much as possible and get your awareness to settle down. Instead of focusing outside all the time, get it to fully inhabit your body. That way, all the little back corridors and basements in this bureaucracy you've got here become opened to your conscious awareness. All of the kamma that you've been creating in a semiconscious way becomes a lot more conscious—and your ability to bring consciousness and discernment to these things is what's going to make all the difference.

Murderers, Vipers, & Floods, Oh My!

July 15, 2013

There's a sutta where the Buddha gives a very extended analogy for the practice. He starts with a man being presented with four vipers. The man is told he has to care for them: feed them, bathe them, lift them up, put them back to sleep. "You have to do this time and again," they say. "And if any of these vipers gets provoked with you, you'll meet with death or death-like pain." So the man runs away.

Then he's told that five murderers are following him right on his heels with the thought that whenever they can catch up with him, they'll kill him. So he runs away even more. Then he's told there's a sixth murderer, someone who used to be an intimate companion but now has his sword raised and is ready to slice off the man's head.

The man keeps running until he gets into an empty, deserted village. He goes around the village, as people would do in those days, to check out what treasures might have been left behind when the village was deserted. But everything he looks at is totally empty, void, hollow. Every house is empty, void, hollow. Every pot is empty, void, and hollow. Then he's told that village-attacking bandits are about to attack the village. So again, he has to run away. He finally gets to a stream. He sees that this shore of the stream is dangerous, but the other shore is safe. He has to cross the stream, so he does that by putting together a raft. And, using his hands and feet to swim, he gets across to the other side—finally to safety.

The four vipers stand for the four properties of the body, which are always ready to be provoked. The five murderers, of course, are the five aggregates; the sixth one is passion and delight, ready to cut off your head. It's something intimate, but it's ready to cut off your head at any time. The empty village stands for the sense organs. The bandits attacking the village stand for the objects of the senses. The raft stands for the noble eightfold path, and the far shore, of course, stands for nibbana. The near shore stands for self-identity. Everything you identify with is there. The five aggregates and the four elements, the sense spheres, everything that's you or yours: That's all on the near shore, and you create your self-identity out of that.

But notice the stream that you cross. It's not a smooth lake; it's got a strong

current. It stands for what they call the fourfold flood. That's the flood of sensuality, the flood of views, the flood of becoming, and the flood of ignorance. In other words, as you practice the path, it's very easy to get swept away by any of these things.

So don't think that when you sit here with your eyes closed, you'll just float your way over to nibbana. The dangers are not only on this shore; they're also on the river you have to cross.

Take the flood of sensuality. You sit here and all of a sudden you find yourself thinking of all the different sensual pleasures you'd like to get engaged in—things you're missing right now. And you can embroider them with all kinds of details that make them appealing. The Buddha calls these thoughts *sensual resolves:* your plans for sensual pleasures. You'd like this, you'd like that. You can cook up all kinds of narratives around how nice it would be to get this pleasure, how nice it would be to get that pleasure. And your attachment to this kind of thinking pulls you away. That's one thing that keeps you from getting across to the other shore.

The antidote there, of course, is to look at the downside of those pleasures. First, just look at how much your sensual pleasures and plans are lying to you. There's that great story in Ajaan Lee's biography about the time he was a young monk and was feeling tempted to disrobe. He goes up into an empty spot in the chedi at Wat Sra Pathum in Bangkok. He makes his plans: how he's going to disrobe, what lay life is going to be like. And at first, the story is really amazing. He gets an ideal wife from a noble background and lands a good job. He gets a kid. But then reality sets in. The wife is not all that healthy. After all, she came from a noble background; she's not used to having to work. She dies. And things just go downhill from there, until he says, "Gee, I wish I hadn't disrobed." Then he reminds himself, "Well, no, I haven't disrobed. Here I am!" Simply by being truthful to himself, he began to realize, with all the sensual pleasures he was planning and thinking about: All that thinking and planning was a lie.

Notice that when the Buddha's talking about sensuality, it's not the objects that are the problem. The problem is the stories that we like to create around them. We're really, really attached to our story-making. But still, we have to look at the downside and that includes looking at the downside of the objects. The human body is the number one sensual attraction. We start out being attracted to our own bodies—attached to them—and then from there, we go on to other people's bodies.

So we have to turn around and look at our bodies. This is why the Buddha has that meditation on the 32 parts of the body. Or he had 31; the Commentary added another one. But there are not just 32. A lot of parts are missing in the list, and you can add any parts you like that help remind you that this body you've

got here, if you take it apart and look at all the different parts, is pretty disgusting. The clothing you use: If you wore it for several days at a time, you couldn't stand it. You'd have to wash it. And it's not from the dust outside; it's from all the sweat and other stuff that comes oozing out through the skin. So this contemplation is one of the weapons you use against that flood of sensuality that comes washing over you while you're sitting here and meditating.

Then there's the flood of views. Number one is, "What are you doing here, sitting here, just doing nothing with your mind? Can't you be doing something more creative?" Okay, what about the creations? What do they accomplish? And what is this voice? Where is it pushing; where is it coming from? There are lots of views that could get you to give up the practice, especially if you're born in the West. Lots of our cultural values push us away from the Dhamma, push us away from really trying to look deeply into ourselves. We've got a lot of those voices within us that we identify with, and they've got lots of clever arguments. But don't think that people raised in Buddhist countries don't have similar problems. They've just got difference voices—different ways of getting pulled away from the practice based on views of one kind or another.

So you've got to have good arguments against them. If they're going to be stubborn, you have to be stubborn, too. Sometimes they refuse to divulge why they want you to do something. They simply adopt a threatening or a seductive tone and insist that you've got to do it. You say, "Well, I'm not going to listen to you until you give me a good reason." They'll try to push you. They'll yell at you, they'll get into your breath, and from there they'll get into the hormones of the body and make it seem like you can't stand to sit here. As they say in Thai, those voices will put a squeeze on your nerves. But you've just got to be stubborn. "I need a good reason for why I should stop meditating." And when they finally offer a reason, ask yourself: Is this going to take you any place you've never been before? The meditation promises to take you all the way to the other side of the river where you've never been. And the people who stand there, beckoning you: They're reliable people.

This is one of the reasons why the ajaans in Thailand stress so much the principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and not in accordance with your views. There are so many people in the West who say the Buddha tells you to trust yourself, rely on yourself, don't believe anything you don't already agree with. But he never really said that. He did say that you have to test things for yourself, but you also have to take into consideration the counsel of the wise—because after all, your perceptions can really be skewed, especially around the area of sensuality.

There's that great passage where he talks about the leper. The leper sits there and takes a stick, heats it in the fire and then, when the stick is nice and hot,

cauterizes his wounds with the stick because it feels good. Why does it feel good? Because as the Buddha said, his perceptions are skewed. If he were actually cured of leprosy, would he take a stick, put it in the fire, and stick it on his skin? No way! And does it really help his wounds? His wounds just get more and more festered. It feels good for a bit, but the wounds get worse down the line. And again, it's all because of his skewed perceptions.

The Buddha said that this is what people who are attached to sensuality are like. And only if you're beyond sensuality can you really trust yourself. This is why we need guidance when the Buddha talks about taking yourself as your refuge. He doesn't stop with that statement. He immediately adds, take the Dhamma as a refuge, and he equates the two. That means turning yourself into Dhamma—taking the Dhamma as your pattern for who you want to be.

That, of course, connects with the third flood, which is becoming: the sort of person you want to be, the sort of world you want to inhabit. Do you want to inhabit the world of artists? Do you want to inhabit the world of lawyers? Do you want to inhabit the world of… whatever? At the very least, the Buddha says, you can take on the identity of a meditator. Be a good meditator, but watch out for what happens when you get tied up in your self-identity.

There's a really fine passage where he talks about the practice of a person of integrity as opposed to the practice of a person of no integrity. The person of no integrity is constantly comparing himself with other people. If his virtues are better than others, he exalts himself over that. If he lives in the forest, whatever his ascetic practice, he exalts himself over that. That's what it means to be a person of no integrity. You can do the things. You can do the practices. You could even get in the very high stages of jhana and yet still be a person of no integrity because you're constantly building a sense of self-righteousness that you use as a bludgeon against other people. Or even if you just think it—"I'm better than those people"—there! You've missed the whole point.

As the Buddha says, the person of integrity is one who realizes that even if you've attained something like this, as soon as you start building an identity around it to compare yourself with other people, the basis has already changed. Build a basis around a nice state of concentration and start getting proud of it? The concentration's gone; the value of that practice is gone. So you have to be very careful. You have to learn how *not* to create a sense of self, of your identity around these things. That's how you get to the other shore. There can be a provisional sense of self as you gain the pride and satisfaction that comes from just mastering things—you're able to do something you couldn't do before—but when you start comparing yourself to other people, that's when it gets bad. So watch out for that flood.

And then finally there's the flood of ignorance, which covers all the other

things that are going to come washing over you as you practice, all the wrong ways of paying attention to things that don't view those things in line with the four noble truths. You've got to stand firm. Keep paddling away. You hold onto the raft. Of course, we know that once you get to the other side, you can let go of the raft. But while you're practicing, you've got to hold onto your concentration. If it starts seeming dumb to be sitting here and not thinking anything, remember: It's a skill. It needs to be protected. You have to watch out for it, to look after it. There's that phrase where the Buddha talks about protecting your mindfulness by putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Okay, there are lots of things out there in the world that are going to pull you away saying, "This would be better; that would be better." Or, "This is something you want to get upset about." You have to learn how to inure yourself to these things. To protect yourself. And that's a skill. It requires questioning all the values you've picked up from the world.

That's how you make yourself your own refuge, your own island: by taking everything—all the aggregates that are usually used to make your sense of self—and turning them into the path. That's what will get you over to the other side. You have to realize that even though there are lots of dangers on this shore and you don't want to stay here, still you're going to have to face a lot of dangers as you practice, things that'll pull you away. They'll pull you back to the shore and carry you down, as the Buddha said, to the rapids and whirlpools of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance.

So you always have to be vigilant as you practice. Don't think that as soon as you propose the idea to the committee of the mind, "Hey, let's meditate!" everybody in the committee will chime in and say, "Yes, that sounds great." We've all had opposition in our internal committees. The important thing is to realize that you don't have to identify with the opposition. It's normal, it's going to keep on resisting, but you don't have to identify with it. As the Buddha said, these currents are strong but they can be overcome. There is that safe shore. And all the people who get there were people on *this* shore before. It's not like they were born superhuman. They simply had a really strong sense of the dangers here and a willingness to face the dangers that you encounter on the path—with the support from the Buddha. We talk about taking refuge in ourselves and at the same time, taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It's all the same thing because you take them all as examples you want to emulate. Without the examples, where would you gain any idea of how to do this?

This is why the Buddha said the whole of the practice is admirable friendship. It's not that the admirable friend is going to do the practice *for* you. It's simply that, because we have the Buddha as an admirable friend, we know that this can be done. We have his guidance. We have his example. And we have

the Sangha to show that the Buddha wasn't the only person who could do it.

So make yourself a member of the noble Sangha. That's when the refuge will be inside you, and you can be an example to others. That's where all these versions of refuge come together.

Two Roads to the Grand Canyon

February 17, 2013

I just came back from a trip to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. When I was on the road there and the road back, I was thinking about an image I've used many times in the past: that the path of practice we're following here is like the road to the Grand Canyon. It doesn't cause the Grand Canyon to be, and the fact that you're following the path doesn't cause the Grand Canyon to be, but following the road takes you there.

But this time going to the Canyon, we entered by one road and came back by another. There are basically two roads to the South Rim, and they illustrate the dangers on the path in two different ways. The road coming from the south bears no resemblance to the Grand Canyon at all. The land is flat and scrubby. Nothing special at all. This is similar to the fact that the path is quite different from the goal, which is why many people object to certain parts of the path. After all, we're going to a goal that's totally unconditioned, so how can the path be conditioned? We're going to a goal that doesn't require any effort or choices when you're there, so why should the path require effort? Why should it require choices? Yet that's simply the way it is.

After all, why should the road to the Grand Canyon look like the Grand Canyon? The Grand Canyon itself is not a road. But to get there, you have to make an effort. When you're standing at the Grand Canyon, there's no effort required at all. But to get there, you do have to work. It's not just a matter of letting go or accepting things as they are. You really do have to put together the causes that can bring the path together.

Virtue, concentration, and discernment all require work. If virtue were easy or natural, it wouldn't require training. The Buddha wouldn't have called it a training. The same with concentration: You do have to put an effort into it. It's a very delicate effort in the sense that it requires a lot of precision, but it also requires strong dedication. The same with discernment: You have to think things through from many different angles, look at them from many different angles, and be as carefully observant as you can.

This is one of the reasons why the training traditionally has been an apprenticeship. You try to find a qualified teacher and stay with that person for at least five years, maybe more, because as the Buddha points out, some people are

like the tongue that can taste the soup and immediately know the taste of the soup. Other people are more like the spoon that sits in the soup and never knows the taste. And staying with the teacher is not just a matter of learning about the words of the Dhamma or of the Vinaya, or learning about the techniques of meditation. It's a *total* training because if you're going to be observant in your meditation, you have to learn how to be observant outside.

It may seem like little things are unimportant: where things are placed, how we can save money on our heating bills, or whatever. They seem to be far away from nibbana, but going to nibbana requires that you be observant. As Ajaan Lee once said, "When you live in a monastery, your eyes have to be as large as the monastery." In other words, you have to see what's going on. Not that you make it a burden on yourself, but you have to be observant and do what you can. This may seem like a petty issue, but it's not. If you can't observe things outside, you're certainly not going to observe the little tricks the mind plays on itself inside. And those are often the things that really stand in the way of insight.

So you have to accept the fact that there are certain features of the path that are not like the goal at all. As Ven. Ananda pointed out, we're here to get to the point where we don't need food any more, and yet following the path requires food. We try to go beyond craving and conceit, and yet following the path requires a certain amount of craving and a certain amount of conceit. You need to have the desire, and to have the confidence that you can do this path if your practice is going to succeed.

That's one type of danger. The other type of danger is illustrated by the road coming to the South Rim from the east. You go along near the canyon of the Little Colorado River, and if all you know about canyons is what you've read, you might think you've already reached the Grand Canyon. After all, it is a canyon, and it's relatively big. Only when you actually get to the Grand Canyon do you realize that the canyon of the Little Colorado River is very small in comparison, and it's nothing at all like the Grand Canyon. This illustrates the danger that some parts of the path mimic what you may have heard about the goal. This is why there are people out there who think they've gained awakening, or they think they've gained stream entry or whatever, when they haven't gotten anywhere near. I seem to be encountering more and more of these people all the time. Some of them have been certified by other teachers. But the question is: Are the teachers qualified? Have *they* seen the Grand Canyon?

One of the worst things you can do to yourself in the practice is to assume that you've reached a noble attainment when you actually haven't, because that cuts off the possibility of genuine discernment arising. So you always have to be cautious. Feelings of oneness, feelings of light, and feelings of spaciousness: These things all come under the factors of concentration. A sudden opening up can be

what's technically called a neurotic breakthrough. It's not a good term; it sounds like you're *becoming* neurotic, but actually, it's a breakthrough through a neurosis that you've been carrying around. You suddenly realize you don't have to carry it around any more. There's a very strong sense of coming into the present moment, being freed of a lot of the narratives you carried around. But that, too, is just the canyon of the Little Colorado River.

I've talked to people who say fairly nonchalantly that, oh yes, they've experienced the deathless, and it's no big deal. Actually, the deathless is a Very Big Deal. But if you think that what you had was an experience of the deathless, that cuts off the possibility of any further progress.

So you have to be careful about not overestimating your attainments. When something happens in the meditation, just put a little post-it note on it and realize it's just a post-it note. If you have no idea what it is, okay, put a question mark on it. Then watch it for a while and see what it does. Or if the idea that you've reached a certain attainment comes into the mind, notice how the mind reacts to that idea. If you can see any defilement in your reaction, you've come out ahead; you've learned an important lesson about the mind.

So when you think about the path to the goal, think about those two roads to the Grand Canyon. They illustrate different dangers on the path and important principles to keep in mind as you practice. This *is* a conditioned path. You do have to be fired by a certain desire and a certain passion because, after all, the path is fabricated. As the Buddha said, it's the highest of all fabricated phenomena, but it is a fabrication. All fabrications require desire, and they all involve effort. The discernment comes in figuring out how much effort is just right. This is one of the big lessons you learn as you practice concentration. How much pressure do you have to put on the concentration to maintain it, to keep your focus steady, to keep mindfulness continuous? And how much effort is actually getting in the way?

In many ways, practicing concentration is like relaxing into a yoga pose. When you first get into the pose, you feel a little stiff because of the patterns of tension going through the body. But as you stick with the pose, you begin to realize that you can relax this muscle, you can relax that muscle, and you actually get more comfortably into the pose.

So as you sit here and meditate, you're relaxing into the pose of a still mind. As you see different layers of activity falling away—or the potential that they could fall away—and yet you can still maintain the concentration: That's one of the ways you'll gain discernment through the practice of concentration. These are some of the issues of the road coming in from the south.

As for the road coming in from the east, always keep in mind: It doesn't

really matter what name you put on things. The question always is, “Does that experience really put an end to suffering?” You have to look again and again and again to see what levels of suffering remain because we’re not here for status. We’re here to cure these really bad habits we have of creating stress and suffering for ourselves when we don’t really have to.

Insight from Jhana

September 17, 2012

We meditate so that we can put an end to the sufferings in our lives, and particularly to the unnecessary sufferings that the mind imposes on itself. And, as it turns out, those are the sufferings that weigh down the mind. Without those sufferings, there's no problem.

So how does the meditation do this? We make the mind quiet so that we can see the mind in action. First, we develop a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of feeling at home in the present moment. This allows us to become more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing in the present moment. In fact, the process of getting the mind to settle down is like peeling away the layers of an onion. First you deal with the really blatant distractions—the blatant things that are irritating the mind: thoughts about your work, thoughts about home, thoughts about what other people have said and done. All the different hindrances—you want to clear those away.

Once they're gone, the mind gets into concentration, but even then it's not fully settled down. You still need to use some directed thought and evaluation to, on the one hand, fend off any distractions, and on the other, to massage the object of your concentration so it becomes more and more amenable. We think about the breath. We evaluate the breath. We want to figure out which ways of breathing are really comfortable right here and now, and which ones are not. Then you maintain any ways of breathing that are comfortable, and you evaluate how you can expand that sense of comfort so that it fills the whole body.

This way you become more and more sensitive to the different ways the breath energy flows in the body. You learn how to distinguish between the flow of the blood and the flow of the breath. These are two different things, but they're very closely associated. When the breath flows well, the blood flows well, too. But sometimes you'll find that an energy flow goes into part of the body and instead of feeling better, it creates a lot of pressure. That's blood. It's a liquid. It's running up against the solidity of the blood vessels and so it exerts pressure.

The breath, though, doesn't exert pressure. It can flow anywhere. It can flow through atoms. After all, it's an energy. When you make that distinction, you find that it's easier to spread the breath around. Then it gets into more and more refined areas of the body, all the little nooks and crannies, all the way out to every

pore. There'll be a sense of rapture that goes along with this. The rapture is the sense of the movement of the energy, and it feels refreshing. Filling. But then after a while you decide that rapture isn't all that calming. You want something even more still, more silent. So you tune in to a deeper level.

You keep on going inward in this way. As the concentration gets more settled and refined, you begin to discern things that you didn't see before—subtle levels of stress you didn't detect at first. This is one of the reasons why the perception of inconstancy is one of the themes that assists not only with insight, but also with your concentration.

The Buddha taught Rahula the theme of inconstancy even before he taught him breath meditation. The purpose of this theme is so that you can be on the look-out for the little ups and downs in the body and mind. When the stress level goes up in the mind, what did you just do? When it goes down, what did you just do? You want to see what causes led to the ups and downs in the stress. The next question is, are those causes mental activities? That's what you're really looking for: the actions of the mind.

It's very important that when you get the mind still you don't try to interpret it as tapping into some Ground of Being or your True Self or Cosmic Oneness or Primordial Emptiness or anything else of that sort. Those big titles, those abstractions with their capital letters, tend to blind you to what's actually going on. You want to see what you're doing and what you're experiencing as the result of your *actions.* There are movements in the mind—perceptions, thought constructs, acts of fabrication—that get you to those states and can keep you there. But there'll be a slight inconstancy in those movements. The more settled the concentration, of course, the more subtle the inconstancy, but it's still there. You have to learn how to see it.

As you go from one level of concentration to another, sometimes it takes a while to adjust before you can sense this inconstancy. It's like adjusting your eyes when you go from a dark room to a very bright room—and then from the bright room to an even a brighter room. You have to stay with these levels long enough so that you can adjust your sensitivity. Then you begin to detect: Where are you doing something to keep this going? At this point, we're far away from the hindrances. The only real disturbance, the only real stress, is what the mind is doing right here, right now, to maintain its concentration. When you see an unnecessary action that creates unnecessary stress—i.e., unnecessary for staying still, you can let it go.

Now, why does this have an impact that goes all the way through the mind and affects even your strong greed, aversion, and delusion? Because there's a common pattern to all our suffering. It's analogous to eating. Just as the body needs to feed, the mind needs to feed, and it's in the act of feeding that we suffer.

But this is so basic to us. This is how we identify ourselves. We identify ourselves around the way we feed on physical food, mental food, emotional food.

When the Buddha talked about his ability to remember previous lifetimes, it was all pretty simple. He had this name. He had this appearance. He had this experience of pleasure and pain. He ate this food. And then he died. That's life. Life centers around eating, eating, eating. And again, it's not just on physical food that we feed. We feed on mental and emotional food as well. When the Buddha talked about our sense of self, it was in terms of the functions of the mind around the act of feeding. In Pali, they're called *khandhas.* In English, we call them aggregates. For a long time, I wondered why "aggregate" was chosen to translate the word *khandha.* It sounds like piles of gravel, and there is that image in the Pali, that *khandha* means heap or pile. But why "aggregate"? It turns out back in the 19th century, they made a distinction between organic unity, when you had an organism where everything functioned together toward a common end, and collections that were just aggregates: things were piled together without any coherent interrelationship. So when they chose "aggregate" to translate the word *khandha,* it was to convey the sense that your sense of self is lots of little bits and pieces of things, but there's no real organic unity to it.

So, what are these little bits and pieces? Well, there's the sense of form: your body as you feel it from inside. There are feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness, and these are all related to how you eat. Each of these is actually an activity. Even form is something that you create through having the perception that there is a form here; there is a body here—and it keeps changing. Yet you maintain this belief that this one form goes through time. So you've got this form that keeps deteriorating and so needs to be maintained, needs to feed. At the same time, you've got the form of the food out there on which it has to feed.

Then there are feelings. On the one hand, there's the painful feeling of hunger when you're lacking something. This applies not only to the body but also to the mind, as when you're hungry for companionship or hungry for praise. On the other hand, there's the pleasant feeling of fullness and satisfaction that comes when that hunger has been assuaged.

The next aggregate is perception: one, perceiving the type of hunger you're feeling; and two, perceiving what's actually food out there that you can feed on to assuage that hunger. This is basically how we get to know the world as little children. We crawl around and what do we do when we find something? We stick it in our mouths in the hopes that it might be food. Over time, we learn that marbles are not food. Little toys are not food. But bread *is* food. We have to hold in mind our perceptions as to what is and is not food that will or will not satisfy our hunger.

Then there's fabrication. When you want some food, can you just take it as it is? No, you've got to work with it. You've got to figure out how to get it and then, once you've got it, what you have to do with it so that you can eat it. Some foods you can just stick in your mouth as they are. Others you've got to fix: to peel away the peel, or cook something that can't be eaten raw. This point applies especially with our emotional food. We have to work at relationships so that they satisfy our hunger. That's fabrication.

Then finally, there's consciousness—the awareness of all these activities. That, too, is part of the feeding process.

So these are the things that go into feeding. They're also the things that make up our sense of who we are. Sometimes we identify with the feelings; sometimes with the perceptions; sometimes with different mixtures of these things. That's our sense of self. And where do we see this clearly and directly? We see it in the process of getting the mind into concentration.

We've got our laboratory right here. We've got our test case right here. To get the mind still, you've got form, which is the breath coming in and out. This gives you your sense of the body as you feel it from within. Without the movement of the breath energy in the body, we wouldn't have a sense of form. Try it sometime. Get the mind really, really still—so still that you don't need to breathe. You'll find that your sense of form begins to disintegrate, first into a little cloud of sensation dots or sensation droplets, like a mist. Then the sense of boundary or edge around the form gets very vague, cloud-like. You realize that the movement of the breath was what gave you a sense of the body's shape—where your arms were, where your legs were, and everything. But when that breath movement grows still, there's nothing to confirm the perception of form—so you can drop it. So you've got the breath as form.

Then you've got the feelings, of course, that come with the breath—either comfort or discomfort—and the perceptions that hold you with the breath, along with the various ways of perceiving the breath that allow you to get into deeper and deeper states of concentration. When you can drop the breath and go into a formless stage, you've got perceptions of infinite space, infinite consciousness, or nothingness. Those perceptions are what hold you in those states.

Then there's fabrication. In the beginning, it's verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. These activities allow you to settle down as they massage the breath into something you can find pleasure in, something you can feed on. Then the fabrication gets more and more refined. In the later stages of concentration, this kind of fabrication gets used again as you pull yourself slightly out of one particular state of concentration so that you can analyze it from within. It's like having your hand in a glove. Either it's fully in or it's partially in. If you pull your hand out slightly, it can still be in the glove even

though it's not snugly there. In the same way, if your mind is fully in the higher states of concentration, you can't analyze those states. But you can pull out a little bit from the concentration, and yet not destroy it. You're partly in and partly out. That's when you can analyze it to see where there's still some stress coming and going in that state, and what you're doing to cause it. This is all the work of fabrication, engaged in what's called appropriate attention: comparing what you're doing to what you *should* be doing in terms of the duties of the four noble truths.

Then, of course, there's the consciousness of all these activities.

So you've got all of the aggregates right here in a very pure form, very immediate form, so that you can observe right here, right now, as the mind is quiet, what the interactions are among them—and how they create stress.

What you've got to learn how to do first is to get the mind really enamored with this practice, so that you can use it to pry away your hunger for other things. You've got your jhana as food. The Buddha talks about this many times. When you're well fed with this kind of food, you're not so hungry for things outside. You're not so hungry for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or for your thoughts and plans around the pleasures they can provide. That's when it's easier to see them—as he said in the sutta we chanted just now—as on fire. You realize that all the pleasures and pains you've gotten from them were on fire. Seeing this makes you less interested in them and, as a result, your attachment to the concentration gets stronger.

Now there's healthy attachment to concentration and pathological attachment. Pathological is when you just want to hide away in the concentration and don't want to do your duties. You don't want to engage with the world outside. You don't want to engage with the questions you need to ask inside to get beyond suffering and stress. That's unhealthy. You have to realize that the problem is not with the world outside. It's with the irritability of the mind inside. You've got to learn how to use your concentration to strengthen your mind in your dealings with the world outside so that you're not weak in the face of unpleasant things. You can actually strengthen your mind to withstand these things better as you do your duties.

Healthy attachment is when you realize you really want to find your happiness here and you learn how to maintain a sense of a still center as you go through the world, doing your duties. Whenever there's a free moment, you come back to the breath. Get as much energy and as much refreshment as you can from the breath. That way you can use your attachment to your still center as a way of prying away your other attachments. At the same time, staying with that center for a long period of time enables you to familiarize yourself with the aggregates as they're present in the state of jhana. If you don't stick with it for

long periods of time, you won't develop the sensitivity you need to see these things.

Ultimately there comes a point when you begin to develop a sense of disenchantment even with the jhana. Again, the Pali word for disenchantment —*nibbida*—is related to the process of feeding. It refers to the sense of having had enough of a particular kind of food. You love cheesecake but then you see that it's having a bad effect on your blood vessels, to the point where finally you can look at it and realize that you can't stand cheesecake anymore. The effort that goes into eating it is no longer worth doing. From that comes dispassion.

Dispassion is crucial because our continued fabrication—and this applies to all the aggregates—is fed by passion. It's because we're feeding on these things, getting food out of them, that we keep engaging them. But when you realize that they themselves are not worth hanging on to, and the food they provide is not worth hanging on to, why bother? That's when the mind can let go. And because it has been letting go of other things, this act of letting go is special. If it's not, then you simply go into another level of concentration. But when it's really special, you do something that you've never done before. There's a moment of absolutely no intention, no fabrication at all. And that opens things up in the mind. That's how you find the deathless.

This is why jhana is so important for giving rise to insight—because it allows you to see precisely *where* you've been holding on and *why* you've been holding on. It's a test case for all the suffering that's created by this felt need to feed, feed, feed, eat, nibble, gobble, whatever, all the time. It's our most basic attachment. I've heard that people held in concentration camps or in prisoner-of-war camps, in the very beginning, talk about sex. After a while, they lose their interest in sex. But they talk about food all the time because that's what the mind is most obsessed with.

Well, make jhana your food here as you're meditating. Let yourself get obsessed with it. It gives us a test case for why it is that we like to feed, and it puts us in a position where we can begin to ask ourselves: Is there a possibility that we could find happiness without feeding? In the course of contemplating that, our sense of our identity around the act of feeding begins to resolve itself clearly into aggregates. Our solid sense of self begins to dissolve away. If you ask people at the beginning of the practice, "Would you like to find true happiness even though it would involve letting go of your sense of identity?" Most people would say, "No, it's not worth it." But as you approach the issue in this strategic way, first getting yourself attached to the jhana, and then seeing what happens when you begin to regard your sense of self simply as an activity around the feeding, you find that you're less attached to it. You see that it really wasn't worth feeding on after all. That's how we take this whole mass of suffering apart.

But the key element here is getting the mind to really settle down so that it's really solid in the present moment and can see these things clearly. That's a part of the path you can't do without.

The Wisdom of Incongruity

October 22, 2013

One of the first lessons of meditation is seeing how disorderly and chaotic your mind can be. Stream-of-consciousness novels have nothing on the strange shifts and incongruous fragments that the mind can toss up. If you try to trace where your mind has been or the course of its inner conversations even over the course of five minutes, you find that it's zigged and zagged all over the place.

Of course, when we're getting the mind to settle down, we're trying to stop that. To get things focused. To get things centered. In the beginning, we actually have to use our ability to think around things from various angles to help get the mind settled in on the breath in a comfortable way. If the mind has a tendency to think, well, try to have it think about the breath. Think about evaluating how comfortable it is, where you feel it, where it feels good, where it doesn't feel good. Give the mind some work to do. As long as it wants to work, wants to think, give it something good to think about that's related to the breath. That way it can gradually zero in, zero in on the breath.

That's one of the uses of our ability to shift contexts: to be in one story and all of a sudden go through a modulation and find yourself in a totally different story, a different world. This ability is also useful for insight. If we didn't have this ability, if everything in the mind were perfectly consistent, we would go mad. When you think about people who try to develop a system that explains all of reality—where everything is consistent and everything fits very neatly in its own proper place—you realize that they're crazy. Our minds are more like a bag full of bits and pieces; some of the bits and pieces are large fragments, and others are just tiny little ones. As we move from one state of becoming to another, what makes sense in one state of becoming is not going to make sense in another. And when we meditate, we learn how to use that.

For instance, with the contemplation of the body: We tend to think about certain aspects of our body in certain contexts and in other contexts we banish those aspects from our thoughts. One way of developing a sense of dispassion for the body is to think about putting your body in different contexts. Like Ajaan Singthong's question: Would you want to swim in a vat full of saliva? No, of course not. And yet you're swallowing it every day. What you're willing to swallow, what you're willing to swim in: Those are two different things. Or would you be willing to take a bath in a bathtub of blood? No. And yet you've

got it coursing through your veins all the time. In other words, step back and put the different parts of the body in a different context and you begin to see how alien they can be.

The same with other things going on in the mind: Step out of your normal context. When you've got a story going on about someone doing this to you or doing that to you, try to get out of the story and look at it from another perspective entirely.

I was reading an interview with John McPhee recently. He had written an enormous tome on geology, and part of it had included a long section on geological time. After it came out, he got letters from many cancer patients saying how that section had really put their minds at peace. When you think about, say, dying at age 30, when your friends are going to live to be 70 or 80—if you think in the normal human time frame, dying at 30 seems to be a real tragedy. But if you think in geological time, where they measure things in millions of years, in fact, the smallest unit is a million years, the fact that your life is 30 years rather than 70 doesn't seem so bad. Just the shift of context can make a huge difference in how you perceive things.

So when you find yourself angry at someone, or you find yourself attracted to someone, try to shift the context. Look at the situation from a different angle. Bring a different set of perceptions.

If you perceive someone's words coming right at you, try holding the perception that they're going *past* you. The reason they seem to be coming into you is that you've got an internal vacuum cleaner that sucks up all the dirt and brings it inside. So turn off the vacuum cleaner. Then you realize you're not the victim of that person's words. They're just sounds that go past. You're actually the victim of your own tendency to bring those words in and use them to stab yourself again and again—both right there at the moment when it's happening and then again later. This is one of the reasons the Buddha uses so many analogies, so many *vivid* analogies, like the one of the bandits sawing off your limbs. He says that if you hold that image in mind, realizing that even in a situation like that you've got to have goodwill for the bandits, then you look at the words that people use to hit you and they seem a lot easier to take. At least they're not sawing off your limbs.

Another useful image is of the horse that needs to have the whip dig down to its bone before it's willing to obey. Are you that kind of meditator? If you are, do you want to keep on being that kind of meditator? Or can you see the wisdom of being more willing to listen to the Dhamma before things really dig into your bones? Learn how to think about things in terms of these analogies instead of your normal ones, and they'll give you a new perspective. The ability to step out of your thought worlds will save you from getting pulled into all the defilements

that created those thought worlds to begin with—that picked and chose and decided that this detail you're going to focus on and that other detail you're going to ignore.

You have to remember that all of our defilements are based on a partial way of looking at things. They have big blind spots. So what you've got to do is to turn the light on those blind spots and remind yourself that there *must* be another way to look at this. Ajaan Lee recommends a good way of making sure that you don't fall for your insights. When an insight happens, it seems to crystallize lots of different things. Everything seems to come together and make perfect sense. And it's really compelling, really alluring. But you have to make sure you aren't falling for the allure of a subtle defilement. So he recommends that, when an insight happens, you ask yourself: To what extent is it false? To what extent is the opposite true? Look for the fragmentary nature of the insight. That will help to pull you out of a lot of things that could otherwise really make you crazy.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha never set out a system. There's a consistency to his teachings, but it's a strategic consistency. All the teachings are aimed at the same thing but they approach it from different angles. When you find yourself at one spot, this particular teaching is going to pull you in the right direction. If you're in another spot, another teaching will pull you in the right direction. It's like Ajaan Chah's old comment that when he sees people going off the right side of the road, he says, "Go left, go left"; when they go off the left side of the road, he says, "Go right, go right." The words may seem contradictory but the purpose is consistent.

And the same with all the Buddha's teachings: They're aimed at the same thing, but they come from different angles, because people are coming from different angles. Even his analogies he doesn't always use in the same way. Sometimes, for instance, a stream is a symbol for the stream to awakening. Other times, it's the stream of craving. The fact that these two images look the same but are meant differently is supposed to jolt you out of getting complacent. Learn to look at things from different angles and you'll learn a lot.

Another one of Ajaan Lee's recommendations is that when you listen to the Dhamma, you should take what's taught and then compare it to the opposite of what's taught. Toss them around. When you hear about inconstancy, look for what's constant. When you hear about stress, look for where pleasure and ease are useful. When you hear about not-self, look to see what you can actually get under your control. And someplace in the cracks between those different thought worlds and concepts is where the light of freedom shines.

So it's always useful to learn how to question your perceptions: your perceptions about your body, your perceptions about your relationships with

other people. And remember that sanity lies in stepping back.

One of the things I especially appreciated about the ajaans in Thailand was their sense of humor: the type of humor that comes from being able to step back and look at things as they really are, from an angle that people don't ordinarily look at or look from. There's that ancient Greek statement that the gods laugh. They laugh at human failings. And why do gods laugh at human failings? Because the gods are separate. They step back; they're not totally involved. And the ajaans laugh, too—because they've learned how to step back from their own crazy thoughts, their own defilements.

So learn how to step out and step back. Look at things from a different angle. When things are not going well, ask yourself, "What am I believing here? What are my underlying perceptions? Can I look at things using a different set of perceptions?" Think of each thought world as a fragment. It's kind of like a hologram: There's always one spot in the hologram where the image cannot be reproduced. Look for that spot so you can step out. That's a lot of what the process of discernment is all about—seeing incongruities, where things don't quite come together, and then using those incongruities for the sake of freedom.

Wisdom as a Tool

May 9, 2012

We're fortunate in our practice that we've got a lot of good guidance. We've got the Buddha's teachings, the teachings of noble disciples, and of the great ajaans. But even so, as we sit down to meditate, for each of us it's a process of discovery—in the same way that Columbus discovered America. It wasn't really lost. A lot of other people knew that America was there, but he didn't know, and so when he came across it, for him it was a discovery. And it's the same for us as we sit down to meditate. In one way we're going over a territory that other people have gone over many, many times before. But for us it's new. And in that sense we have to learn how to be our own teachers, our own guides. We have to learn how to be our own mainstay.

As the Buddha said, the self is its own mainstay, so a lot of the practice is learning how to be a reliable mainstay for yourself so that when something happens in your meditation, you have a sense of how reliable it is. If you're not reliable, you won't know when anything or anyone else is reliable—which means that you have no mainstay at all.

In this area it's good to learn from people who had to do a lot of exploring on their own—people like Ajaan Mun or Upasika Kee. They received training as they started out, but then they learned that there were a lot of areas where they had to explore on their own. In Ajaan Mun's case, he had a lot of psychic knowledge, which his teacher Ajaan Sao didn't have. And Ajaan Sao told him that he was going to have to learn how to find his own way through that challenge and not get thrown off course.

There are two primary lessons that he relied on. One I learned from Ajaan Fuang, which was that whatever comes up in your meditation in terms of a vision, you don't try to determine—when, say, you see or hear someone speaking to you—Is this a real deva? Or whatever. The skillful question is: Is the lesson they're teaching a good Dhamma lesson? That's always what you should be looking for: What kind of Dhamma lesson could you gain from this? It doesn't matter who you see in the vision. What matters is the quality of what they tell you.

And this applies to books as well. A particular Dhamma lesson may be good for somebody at some time, but it's not necessarily good for you right now. So

you have to learn how to judge what's right for you right now.

Similarly, when an insight comes into your mind, the first question should be, "What kind of impact does it have?" If you took that insight as true, how would it influence your actions?

This comes under the principle of appropriate attention, figuring out: Is this going to help you understand suffering? Is it going to help you abandon craving? Will it help you develop the path? Those are the questions you want to ask.

Ajaan Lee had a student, a woman who worked in the palace for many years. She had listened to many, many of the great sermon-givers in Bangkok in her time. When she was told by one of her teachers to go to listen to Ajaan Lee, her first thought was: "What does he know that I don't know? He's been living all of his life out in the woods. And here I've been in Bangkok and have listened to all the great sermon-givers." But she went and listened anyhow. And she found that she learned a lot of things she had never learned before.

He taught her how to meditate, and she turned out to be somewhat psychic in a variety of ways. Once, in one of her meditation sessions, she had a vision, with a voice accompanying the vision saying, "This was when you were living in Jetavana." When she came out of mediation she thought, "Jetavana. I know that name. I've heard it before, but what is it?" It took her three days to remember that Jetavana was the monastery where the Buddha lived for many years.

But instead of getting excited that she had a memory of a previous lifetime and may have once lived at Jetavana, she took the vision as a lesson in how unreliable your memory is. For most of her life she'd been chanting suttas that had taken place in Jetavana, and yet she was still able to forget it. Instead of coming to a conclusion as to whether the vision was true, she took it as a Dhamma lesson: See how inconstant your perceptions are. That's making good use of a vision.

As for insights that come, Ajaan Fuang used to say, "Don't try to memorize them. You're not here to write a book. If an insight comes, try to apply it right now and see what impact it has. If it's not relevant to what's happening right now," he said, "just forget it. It will come back when you need it if it's an insight that's actually going to be useful. But the insight is to be measured by its immediate impact, what it does." Wisdom after all is strategic. So ask yourself: How would you take that insight and use it as a strategy?

Ajaan Lee had a useful piece of advice for making sure that insights don't get you carried away. He said, if you gain an insight, ask yourself to what extent the opposite is true. Look at things with two eyes, and not just one. If you take an insight that's true only in some cases, and try to apply it everywhere, you've abandoned your sense of judgment. You've lost your sense of time and place.

Remember that only the four noble truths are true everywhere, so use wisdom in how you interpret the limits of the insights you've gained.

Ajaan Mun had another piece of advice, which you can read about in Ajaan Maha Boowa's account of Ajaan Mun's passing away. Ajaan Maha Boowa was feeling really abandoned after Ajaan Mun's death, and then he remembered a piece of advice that Ajaan Mun had given him many times: When something comes up in your meditation that you're not sure about, just watch it. Stay with a sense of the knower, or just bare awareness. Don't jump to any conclusions. Just watch to see where it goes, and that way you come out safe. Again, it's a lesson in not jumping to conclusions.

As for Upasika Kee, one of her favorite pieces of advice was to remember that there are many layers in your mind. Just because you gain an insight in one layer doesn't mean that all your work is done. You have to watch for what happens next. In other words when you let go of something, what comes up in its place? Is there any pride? If there is, see if you can let go of that. If you let any pride or conceit build up around an attainment or an insight, you've blinded yourself. So as soon as something comes up that seems important, watch what happens next in the mind.

You notice that all these pieces of advice teach you to be very careful about causality, learning to see all things—even your most profound insights—simply as part of a causal process. What happens after the insight? What can the insight be used for? If you're not sure if it's reliable, step back. Don't get involved. Keep watching, watching, watching. We're here in the present moment not because it's a great place to be. We're here because it's one of the best places to watch things as they unfold, before we slap labels on them, such as "This is me" or "This is mine or somebody else's" or "This is a great insight." Before you start conjuring up all the processes of becoming around them, learn to see things as events, as they come, as they go, as they give rise to other events—particularly so that you can see where you're adding any unnecessary suffering, to see what your intentions are doing, what your attention is doing, how you pay attention to things. Is it helping you to alleviate suffering? Or is it going to add any more on?

We're not just accepting things. We actually have to pass judgment. And you need some guidance in how to pass judgment. This is one of the reasons why we develop mindfulness and concentration. We're trying to develop the mind that the Buddha said is like earth or like fire. It doesn't shrink back from disgusting things and doesn't get excited about pleasant things. It's a mind willing to watch patiently. You want the sense of patience that allows you to see things all the way from cause to effect. And then after the effect, what's the effect after that? And what's the effect after that? Keep watching so that you can start seeing through all the layers in the mind. After all, we're not here just to *be* in the present moment.

We're here to dig down into the present moment.

The Buddha's teachings on kamma contain a riddle. Our experiences depend to some extent on the past, but we also have this ability to choose in the present moment. We have a certain amount of freedom in our choices. But what is that freedom? Why is it there? How can we make the most use of it? That's where you want to look, so that you can peel away the various layers, and go through the present moment into something that really is deathless.

When the Buddha talked about the deathless, he wasn't talking just in metaphorical terms. There's a dimension that doesn't die. Anything that's in space and time is going to die at some point. Even stars die. Here I'm not talking about movie stars—I'm talking about stars up in the sky. Galaxies get sucked into black holes, and who knows what happens to black holes? But there is a deathless dimension that's something you can touch in the mind that's not subject to any of that change. It's not in the present, in the sense of being in time. Sometimes people talk as if the present were somehow out of time. Actually, the present moment is very much in time. But when you dig down into the present, you find something that's outside of that dimension.

So you have to remember that your insights are tools for doing that digging. We're here not to gather up insights that we can take home and put in a scrapbook. Wisdom is not the aim of the practice. Wisdom is one of the tools of the path. And a large part of that wisdom lies in learning how to use your tools properly. Learn how to make yourself a reliable mainstay so that you can judge, when something happens, whether it's useful or not.

Keep these lessons in mind, so that whatever comes up doesn't pull you off the path. You learn how to govern your own practice, evaluate your own discoveries. After all, when you come right down to it, even if you had the Buddha sitting here right in front of you telling you what to do, you would still have to decide whether he was reliable or not. You'd have to figure out what he was saying, how it applied.

So despite all the help we have, we need to keep coming back to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said, "Let someone come who is observant and honest, who is no deceiver, and I will teach that person the Dhamma." Basically, when he says that, he's telling you to look within yourself for what you're going to need in order to learn the Dhamma. You have to be observant and you have to be no deceiver. You have to be honest with yourself. The Buddha gives you lessons in how to develop those qualities, but you're the one who has to apply the lessons. You're the one who has to judge the results. Did you apply them well? If you have a teacher living nearby, the teacher can help, looking from the outside, noticing if you're carrying around any obvious blind spots. But even then you have to be the responsible one. And the good

news is that you can. Just learn how to do it well.

The True Dhamma Has Disappeared

November 29, 2014

The Dhamma—the Dhamma as the truth—is something that's always in the world. In one of the suttas that we chant, the Buddha says that whether Tathagathas arise or don't arise, there are truths that are always true across the board: All fabrications are inconstant, all fabrications are stressful, all dhammas are not-self. Those things are always true.

But teachings about the Dhamma are not always here. As the Buddha foresaw, his teachings would disappear. He called that the disappearance of the *saddhamma,* the disappearance of the true Dhamma. He knew that it would have to happen, just as it happened to the true Dhamma taught by all the Buddhas of the past.

What's interesting is how he defines the disappearance of the true Dhamma. He says that when counterfeit Dhamma appears, the true Dhamma disappears, in the same way that when counterfeit money appears, true money disappears. Think about that for a minute. The simple existence of counterfeit money doesn't mean that there's no true money out there. It simply means that you've got to be very careful. You can't blindly trust your money any more. You can't just take it out of your pocket and use it to buy things. You have to examine it carefully. And you can't accept money from just anybody. You've got to test it.

The same is true when counterfeit Dhamma appears. Think about what it was like when the Buddha was awakened and there were arahants all over northern India. You could listen to their Dhamma and trust it. There are suttas in the Canon where a person asks a series of questions of one of the Buddha's disciples and then goes to the Buddha, asks the same questions, and gets precisely the same answers. That's what it was like when the true Dhamma had not yet disappeared. The Dhamma was always consistent.

Now, though, there are so many contradictory versions of the Dhamma available that the true Dhamma has obviously disappeared. In fact, it disappeared a long time ago, when other versions of the Dhamma appeared in India, in particular, the teaching that phenomena don't really arise or pass away, that their arising and passing away is just an illusion. That teaching was formulated about 500 years after the Buddha passed away, within the same time frame he gave for the disappearance of the true Dhamma. Since that time, many more

contradictory versions of the Dhamma have appeared, to the point where teachings that contradict one another are a major hallmark of Buddhism in the popular mind.

You may remember the story from the Canon of the blind men and the elephant. Originally, it was used to describe sectarians of other religions and the fact that their grasp of the Dhamma was very partial at best. One blind man feels the elephant's trunk and says that the elephant's like a hose. Another one feels the tail and says, ah, the elephant's like a broom. Then they fight over whether the elephant's like a hose or a broom. Well, in the Chinese version of this story, the blind men represent, not sectarians of other religions, but Buddhist teachers. Everyone's take on the Dhamma, whether they're Buddhist or not is, according to this version, partial. That's what happens when true Dhamma disappears: Every version of the Dhamma gets regarded as counterfeit. When people get used to counterfeit Dhamma, then even when they encounter true Dhamma, it sounds counterfeit to them.

But from the Buddha's perspective, even when counterfeit Dhamma has arisen, there are still some versions of the Dhamma that are true. You simply have to learn how to recognize what's true and what's counterfeit, and watch out for any counterfeit that comes your way. And you have to be especially insistent in drawing a line between what's true and what's not. We can't simply say, "Well, let's all agree that everybody's Dhamma is okay. That way we can get along without arguing." That would be like saying that all money, whether true or counterfeit, is equal. But it's not. If the money's counterfeit and you take it back to the Treasury, they won't accept it. If you practice counterfeit Dhamma, you won't get to the end of suffering. It simply won't work.

It's like Ajaan Chah's simile of salt and sand. We could get people to agree that sand is salt, and for the purposes of discussion, sand would then be salt. But you couldn't use the sand to make your food salty. Agreeing that something is something else may help us get along, but it doesn't make it act like something else. Our agreeing on something doesn't make it true.

So you've got to be really careful. In some cases, counterfeit Dhamma is pretty obviously counterfeit. I was recently reading someone saying that the Buddha was so down on sex and lust because he had spent too much time with his austerities. Now, back in the days of the Buddha, that opinion would have been laughed out of the Sangha. But the sad truth is that at present, there are people who are happy to give it credence. Even obviously false Dhamma isn't all that obvious to some, especially when it panders to their defilements.

There's a story about a novice staying out in the woods, and a prince, Prince Jayasena, comes along, walking for exercise in the morning. The prince says to the novice, "I'd like to ask you a question." Now, this novice apparently had

already had some experience dealing with Prince Jayasena, because he responds, "Ah, I'd rather not answer your question because you wouldn't understand the answer." And the prince says, "Well, I might." So the novice says, "Okay, I'll answer your question, but don't argue, okay?" The prince says, "Okay. The question is this: I understand that there are monks who have overcome sensual desire. Is this true?" And the novice says, "Yes, it is." And the prince says, "That's not possible" and walks away.

The novice then goes and reports his conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "You fool. You can't teach that teaching to the prince. There's no way he's going to understand it. He's too blind." In other words, back in that day, people understood what blindness was. Nowadays they don't. They take their blindness and advertise it as a perceptive insight.

That's a relatively obvious case. A lot of other cases, though, are not quite so obvious. This means that as you listen to the Dhamma or look for a teacher, you have to be extra careful—and especially careful about your motivation for choosing one version of the Dhamma over another. Don't go for something just because it makes you feel good.

Remember the two qualities that the Buddha looked for in a student. The first is that you be really honest, and particularly honest about your own failings and weaknesses. The second is that you be observant. You watch things carefully. Try to look for the telltale signs that show what's true Dhamma and what's not, both in other people and in yourself—but primarily in yourself, because that's where it's easiest to be fooled. If you aren't honest and observant about yourself, it's going to be hard to be honest and observant about other people. Your own blind spots will help you miss the blind spots in other people as well. So you have to be extra, extra careful as you practice.

I know in my own case, studying with Ajaan Fuang, I thought that by the time I started studying with him, I had pretty much already tamed my own pride. But he found instances of my pride that I hadn't seen and dug them out to show to me. That was a real gift. I didn't like seeing those things, I didn't like having them pointed out, but I learned and benefited from the experience.

He had another student, someone who was really nice, very polite, extremely helpful to other people, but deep down inside she believed that she was a non-returner. Now, Ajaan Fuang tried to get the message through to her in all kinds of ways that she wasn't, but she just blocked out his message. Something inside of her wanted to hold onto that so fiercely that she refused to hear the blatant messages he was sending her way. There was something inside her that wasn't quite observant, quite honest. And so she never learned the lesson.

So, now that the true Dhamma's disappeared in the Buddha's sense, we have

to be very careful when we look for it. We have to test it as much as we can, test *ourselves* as much as we can. The teachings on mindfulness, the teachings on concentration and discernment: They're all there to make you a more reliable observer of what's going on in yourself, so that you can see cause and effect, so that you can see those truths of inconstancy, stress, and not-self and use them as tools.

When you get the mind really still and you think that everything is totally still and there's nothing going on in there, watch, look, be very careful, be very discerning. You think you've gone beyond time and space? Well, look around. Is there any inconstancy in that state of mind? Any little blips here or there? If there's a blip, what goes along with the blip? That's inconstancy. It's telling you that there's something fishy going on in here. Look for the cause. If there's any rise or fall in the level of stress, something's going on. It may be quick, it may be subtle, and as I've said, you've got to be extra, extra careful in this time, now that the true Dhamma has disappeared. In other words, it's not obviously everywhere. You have to be very selective.

So try to develop your honesty and your powers of observation. Try to develop your mindfulness, alertness, your ardency: the quality that says, in Ajaan Mun's words, "I don't want to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again." Greed, aversion, delusion, pride: These things have been laughing at us for a long, long time. And over the centuries, they've managed to create a lot of counterfeit Dhamma to make it even harder for us to ferret things out, to recognize them for what they are. So, this throws you back on your own honesty and integrity. You've got to be really selective, very discerning. Develop the qualities that can make you selective and discerning. And that will allow you to find the true Dhamma that's still there.

Glossary

Abhidhamma: The third division of the Pali Canon, composed of texts that elaborate on lists of terms and categories drawn from the discourses.

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his Noble Disciples. Sanskrit form: *arhat.*

Buddho: A meditation word meaning "awake."

Chedi: A spired monument to the Buddha.

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the terrestrial and heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma.*

Dukkha: Stress; pain; suffering.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *karma.*

Luang Pu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana.*

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the Deathless.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra.*

Tathagata: One who has become authentic or has truly gone to the goal. An epithet of the Buddha.

Upasika: A female lay-follower of the Buddha.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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